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HE LEAPED FAR INTO THE DARKNESS.

The Cadet-Detective's Hot Hustle;

OR,

THE WEST POINT ROGUES.

BY HOWARD M. BOYNTON.

CHAPTER I.

FIRST INDICATIONS OF TROUBLE.

GENERAL EARL, then commanding officer at the West Point Military Academy, rushed out of his private office bareheaded, and started for the railroad station, situated about a quarter of a mile from the Government buildings, on a dead run.

Reaching it, he dashed inside and aroused the drowsy telegraph operator.

"Here, Jackson!" he shouted, handing a slip of paper through the window; "wire this down as soon as God will let you!"

The operator took the message, read it carefully, and the next moment it was on its way. Here it is:

"U. S. M. A., WEST POINT, N. Y.,
May 14, 1889.

"TO HENRY R. PARSONS,
Chief Secret Service Bureau,
New York City.

"Send me at once the best man on the force under twenty years of age.

"JAMES D. EARL,
Commanding officer M. A."

"Bring the reply to the message direct to me," ordered the general, "if any is returned."

"All right," said Jackson.

Then the officer turned and ran back toward the main building of the Academy.

He had scarcely disappeared over the hill before a young man in a sergeant's uniform took his place at the window of the telegraph office.

"Jackson!"

"Well?"

"Was that the old gentleman just went out?"

"It was General Earl."

"I thought so. Did he leave a message for you?"

"Yes, and I'm sending it now."

The new-comer watched him until the last word had been sent flying over the wires, and then said:

"Would you mind letting me see what the general sent?"

"No," replied Jackson. "Here it is."

The sergeant read the paper carefully and then handed it back without comment.

"What does it mean?" asked the operator.

"Has there been any more trouble up at the school?"

"Not that I've heard of."

"I don't know anything about it either, but from the general's actions I thought that it must be something important."

"He seemed a little excited, eh?"

"Yes."

There was silence for a moment, and then the sergeant asked:

"Do you know, Jackson, what train this—this fellow could take from the city? The one the general has sent for, I mean."

"If he comes up to-night, he'll have to take the one leaving there at nine o'clock."

"That will get him here about eleven, won't it?"

"Yes."

"All right; much obliged for the information."

The sergeant walked quickly off, leaving the telegraph operator to go to sleep again. He went directly to the Academy, saluted the corporal in charge of the day guard, and rushed up-stairs, to a room on the second floor. A light rap on the door elicited a gruff:

"Who's there?" from within.

"I—Buck Larmount."

"All right, Buck; in a minute."

The door was opened and the sergeant entered.

The room was a small one, not more than twelve feet long by eight in width, furnished plainly but comfortably. It contained, as Larmount walked in, three persons. An officer in gold lace sat on the bed talking earnestly with a roughly-dressed colored man, while the third, who had admitted the sergeant, was dressed in the Academy uniform. They all greeted the new-comer warmly.

"What luck?" asked the officer, while the cadet closed the door and silently bolted it.

"Poor," replied Buck, dropping into a chair and wiping the perspiration from his forehead.

"The general is on the right track, or, at least, has begun to suspect something."

"What!" exclaimed the officer, "are you sure?"

Larmount nodded.

"He has just telegraphed to the chief of the Secret Service Bureau of New York to send a detective up here."

His three listeners stared at him in surprise and dismay, while the colored man made a break for the door.

"Come back, Sam," exclaimed the cadet. "Wait until you hear what Buck has to say before you try to leave."

The darky leaned against the wall not far from the door and listened to the sergeant.

"I saw the general just a few minutes ago enter the telegraph office in the railroad station, and as soon as he had gone away, I asked the operator for the message he had sent. It was a request, as I just said, for a first-class detective under twenty years of age. I suppose by that he means to work the fellow in here as a cadet."

"It looks like it," assented the officer.

"I also discovered," Buck continued, "that the detective will get here on the ten-thirty train to-night if he leaves the city at once."

"And that means—" began the cadet.

"That we will be down at the ten-thirty train to meet him," said Larmount.

The quartette exchanged significant glances.

"It will never do to let one of the Secret Service men get in here," the officer declared, emphatically. "Especially just now, when the general has discovered our latest escapade."

"But it will be dangerous to waylay him," remarked the cadet. "All four of us had better attend to it, don't you think so?"

"Of course," replied Buck, "if we can all get off. Sam, there, is sure to be free, and I presume I can manage it as usual. You two fellows will have to break loose in some way. We'll need all the help we can get, I guess, for to-night's work."

"I think so myself," returned the officer. "There goes the supper-bell now, and we'll have to separate. Meet together at the grove as soon as you can after reveille, and bring along whatever might be serviceable in making the capture."

"And what shall we do with the fellow when once we get him into our hands?" asked Larmount.

The officer nodded toward the colored man.

"Sam'll take care of him, won't you?" old man?

"Yes, sah," answered the darky.

The next moment the room was silently cleared, each of the three students falling in with their companies, and Sam leaving the building for his home a short distance away.

Supper was served presently in the large dining-hall down-stairs, after which the cadets were again formed in line and marched into the drill hall adjoining it. An hour or more was spent here and in the gymnasium, and then the students were at liberty to go to their rooms or to study indoors. A little later "taps" was sounded and all lights in the students' quarters were supposed to be extinguished.

But this was only a supposition. I may venture to say that never at the beat of the drum or the sharp call of the bugle is an order explicitly obeyed at West Point. The students there seem to take pride in disobeying the strictest rules of the Academy, whether or not they are gainers thereby.

Among those who, on the night of which we write, failed to put out their light at the proper time, was Buck Larmount. His room on the third floor was situated quite near the one in which the afternoon's conclave had met. The occupant of the latter was named Harry Zelda. He was a young Southerner who had arrived at the Academy within a year. Buck had been there for two years.

The sergeant listened to the sound of "taps" and paid no further heed to it than to see that his door was securely locked. Whenever the regular tramp of the night guard was heard coming along the hall, the candle at his side would be blown out, only to be relit when the footsteps had died away in the opposite direction.

Buck waited until nearly half-past nine before venturing out on the night's campaign. His methods of escape from the closely guarded building need not be described here. Sufficient it is to say that they are familiar to all live cadets at the Academy, and that escapades there are seldom the fault of the guards.

Larmount walked rapidly across the level campus and down toward the river. His slouch

hat was pulled down over his eyes, and his collar turned up to his ears. The grove which the meeting was to be held was situated near the railroad track, and was a favorite meeting-place for clandestine parties. When Buck arrived he discovered that all three of his comrades had reached the place ahead of him.

"We were afraid you wouldn't come," said the officer, "and were preparing to start without you."

"It's too early yet," responded the sergeant, trying to make out the figures on his watch in the darkness. "It isn't ten o'clock, and the train doesn't arrive in half an hour."

"I know, but we want to have a little consultation first. Sam has prepared everything for the accommodation of our guest, and about all we've got to do is to nab him."

"But how long do you expect Sam to support him?" asked Harry. "It's one thing to catch your man, and quite another to keep him."

"I hadn't thought of that," the officer said, "and I don't know as it's necessary to do so yet. The first thing to do is to get the fellow into our hands. The rest we will attend to later."

The four men passed the next half-hour in earnest conversation, and at the end of that time left the grove and walked toward the little railroad station. No one was about it, and they sat down to await the coming of the train.

Few passengers ever get off at West Point at that time of night, and when the train finally came to a halt, only one man alighted.

"That must be him," whispered the officer. "Are you all ready?"

"Yes," answered his followers, in a breath.

"Then come on. Have you got the ropes handy, Sam?"

"Yes, sah."

"And you the caloroform, Harry?"

"Yes."

"Then here we go. Buck and I will grab him and you two administer the restoratives."

Meanwhile the young man, all unconscious of his danger, walked up the hill toward the Academy building.

He was a good-looking fellow, slightly above the medium height, slim built and with a soldierly bearing. He carried in one hand a light sachel and in the other a cane.

From the window of General Earl's office in the Academy came a gleam of light to signify that that faithful officer was still awaiting the result of his telegram. Toward that window the young man bent his steps.

CHAPTER II.

MAT IN UNIFORM.

A TELEGRAPH messenger boy ran up the steps of the building in New York City occupied by the branch of the Government's Secret Service Bureau.

"Henry R. Parsons," he announced, to a clerk who intercepted him. "Any such person here?"

"There is," said the clerk, with a smile, taking the telegram and signing the receipt.

"All right; see that he gets it," and the boy was off.

The clerk laid the yellow envelope down among several others on the chief's desk to await Mr. Parsons's return and then resumed his work.

It was quite late when the message was read by the person to whom it was addressed, but it received immediate attention. The chief picked up a speaking-tube at his side and whistled through it. The answer at once came back:

"Hello, chief."

"Hello! is this you, Gus?"

"Yes."

"Is Murray in?"

"No."

"Will he be back to-night?"

"Not before twelve o'clock."

"Very well; send him direct to me when he comes in, will you?"

"O. K."

Mr. Parsons dropped the speaking-tube and directed his attention to a large pile of mail matter on his desk. The hours passed rapidly while he worked away, until at last, just as he arose to leave the office, the young man for whom he had sent entered.

"Good-evening, chief; Gus said you wished to see me."

"I did," replied Mr. Parsons. "Read this."

He handed his visitor the telegram he had received.

"It's from General Earl, and he wants a man up at West Point as soon as possible. You seem to fill the bill pretty well, and so I sent for you. Can you go up immediately?"

"Not until to-morrow morning."

"Why not?"

"There are no trains north until then. The last one gets there at half-past ten, and that has left long ago."

"On the West Shore road?"

"Yes."

"But not on the Hudson River road. There's a train from here leaving for Garrison's in about twenty minutes. From there you can easily get across to West Point, which is directly opposite."

"And you think I'd better catch it?"

"Yes, the general seems to need some one pretty badly, judging from the tone of his message."

"All right; I'll start right away, and wire you from West Point if it's anything important."

"Very well; good-by."

"Good-by."

The young man walked down-stairs and caught an Elevated car up-town. He left it at Forty-second street, crossed over and boarded the train just leaving Grand Central Depot for the north.

He was a good-looking young fellow of medium size, strongly built, and with easy manners. His name was Murray—Mat Murray, and he had been employed in the New York branch of the Secret Service Bureau for several years. His varied experiences had fitted him for all sorts of work, and, in spite of his age, he was trusted by the chief with some of the most important cases.

He traveled up as far as Garrison's on his way to West Point, and there discovered that the ferry had long ceased running for the day. The small railroad station was entirely deserted, and when the rumble of the train had died away in the distance, Mat was left standing by the side of the track, without knowing what to do. He took a walk down to the river-shore, and looked about him for some means of getting across. While he was puzzling his brain with the perplexing question, the sound of rowing and the regular splash of oars out in the river attracted his attention, and he stepped down by the side of the ferry-house to await the approach of the boat.

Presently it appeared in the gloom, and he could make out the forms of two persons in it. As it drew nearer he saw that one of them carried in his hand a bag, which, when the boat's keel grated on the sand, was lifted with great care and carried up on the bank. Then one of them returned to his seat in the vessel, while the other, after a short rest, lifted the bag to his shoulder and disappeared in the darkness.

Mat observed all these proceedings as he walked silently along the shore toward the boat. When he arrived in sight of its occupant, the latter immediately shoved out into the stream and bent to his oars.

"Hold on," said the detective, quickening his footsteps. "I want to go across."

This only served to make the boat move faster from the shore, as the man in it exerted himself violently to get out of Mat's sight.

"Come back, will you?" shouted the detective. "I'm very anxious to get over to West Point, and I'll pay you well to row me across."

But the boat disappeared out in the river before the sentence was completed, and with a growl of disgust Mat turned back again. He saw in the dim light that the boatman wore the uniform of the Academy, and naturally supposed that he was on some kind of a lark and refused to entertain a passenger for fear of discovery.

A search through the little village did not disclose a hotel or any place where sleeping accommodations could be obtained, and the detective was forced to return to the little ferry-house.

A glance at his watch showed it to be nearly three o'clock in the morning, and he took a seat on a grassy spot near the river and leaned back against a tree. Before long he fell asleep.

He remained in this condition for nearly an hour, at the end of which time he was awakened by the sound of another boat slowly approaching the shore.

He sat up and listened. The vessel was being propelled directly toward him with muffled oars, and when it reached a position about fifty feet from the shore, the rowing ceased.

Mat saw that the boat had but a single occupant, and, although he too was in uniform, the detective perceived that it was not the person he had first seen. The new-comer, having baled the boat, drew the oars inside and stood up. For a moment he scarcely moved as he floated gently down-stream, and then, suddenly, Mat saw a bright flash in the darkness, a sharp report echoed back among the hills, and the man plunged overboard, disappearing beneath the dark waters.

To say that the detective was surprised at this sudden and unexpected move on the boatman's part is to express it mildly. The place he was in seemed admirably suited for suicidal purposes, but to have the murder committed right before his eyes was something for which he was totally unprepared.

But that did not deter him from acting promptly.

He dashed down the steep embankment, and a second after the man had disappeared, was moving toward the spot with powerful strokes. He reached the boat and drew himself inside, looking closely about him for some signs of the suicide. But none appeared. For nearly an hour he rowed about the spot, but could discover nothing, and then decided to use the dead man's boat—for such Mat considered its former occupant—to convey himself across the river.

He took a final look over the waters, and then sent the small craft spinning toward West Point. It was a matter of a few minutes before he landed on the other side of the river, and fastened the boat to the dock. Then he went on shore and started up toward the Academy.

But he was no better off there than he had been at Garrison's for he did not know where General Earl's apartments were, and he did not care to wake up the guards for the purpose of finding out. So he lay down on the lawn under the shade of a hemlock tree, and slept until the booming cannon announced the break of day.

Then he sought the apartment of the commanding officer and sent in his name to the general. Although the latter was still abed he at once expressed his desire to have Mat sent to him.

The detective entered and took a seat near the window overlooking the river. He sat there for a few moments while the officer was dressing, and when General Earl had made himself presentable, he came out to greet the new-comer.

"You are from Parsons, I suppose?" he said, extending his hand.

Mat replied in the affirmative.

"All right, then, I'm glad to see you. I was expecting you last night and sat up for an hour or more awaiting you. What is your name?"

"Mat Murray."

"Perhaps you'd better get in the Academy uniform before I say anything more. Come along with me."

The detective arose and followed General Earl into an inner room, in which lay a large number of the gray uniforms.

"Find one of them that will fit you," said the officer, "and then come back again. I will wait in the next room."

"All right," replied Mat.

Five minutes later he had rigged himself out as a private in the third company, leaving his own clothing where he had secured the uniform, and then stepped out to continue his interview with the general.

CHAPTER III.

THE MYSTERY AT WEST POINT.

MAT took a seat on the bed, while General Earl, with both hands plunged into his trousers pockets, strode up and down the room.

"You've had some experience, I suppose, in the line of Secret Service work, haven't you?" asked the officer, regarding Mat closely from beneath his shaggy brows.

"Yes, sir," replied the detective.

"Somehow, I think you're just the kind of fellow I want. You look like a soldier, and the boys will not be likely to notice the deception."

Mat acknowledged the compliment with a bow.

"You won't have to go into the drill or any of the school exercises, but I have given you the uniform because a stranger here would be sure to attract attention, especially among the guilty parties. Do you see?"

"Yes, sir," replied Mat.

"All right, then, I'll tell you why I have sent for you."

The general clasped his hands behind him, coughed until his throat was clear, and then resumed his restless walk up and down the room as he began:

"In the first place, we—the faculty of the Academy—have been bothered lately by an unusual number of escapades among the cadets. They seem to belong to a certain clique which we have been unable to discover. Sometimes the cannons would be fired in the middle of the night and once or twice they were lowered into the river. The lawn has been dug up, the fire-bell rung, the water-pipes cut and almost no end

of pranks have served to drive me almost wild within the past few months. But of course I would not have sent for a detective to ferret out such things. That is part of my own duty and I have done my best in regard to it."

The general's pace increased in rapidity as he went on and he flapped the tails of his gold-embroidered coat back and forth in his excitement.

"But now," he exclaimed, "now something else—something worse has happened. Something not only vicious but absolutely criminal, and I'll discover the perpetrators if it costs as much money as the Academy owns to do so. I won't be beaten in this thing by the rascally cadets, and when I do discover them, may I lose my position if they don't go to jail for life."

The excited officer stopped before Mat at this point and bringing one hand around in front of him, said slowly and impressively:

"Yesterday morning when I arose I discovered that the paymaster's office had been robbed of twenty-thousand dollars in gold."

Mat recrossed his legs and nodded.

"Twenty-thousand dollars in gold," General Earl repeated. "Enough money to pay our expenses for one full term. We received it from the Government's treasury in New York last Friday and I delivered it to the paymaster myself. He locked it up in his safe—or says he did—and yesterday morning it was gone. Come with me."

The general turned abruptly and started for the door. Mat arose and followed him.

"I'll take you to the paymaster's office," General Earl said, leading the way down-stairs, "and you can see for yourself how the land lays. If Mason is there he can tell you the story he told me. He's the paymaster."

Reaching the first floor again the two passed to the rear of the house and approached a door at the end of a long and narrow hallway. The panels were of steel, riveted in a frame of the same metal and the general opened its combination lock with no little difficulty.

Entering, they found themselves in a good-sized room, fitted up like a vault in a banking house. In one side a large safe had been built and the other three were occupied with small drawers. The floors were of stone and the apartment was lighted by a small gas-jet in the center of the ceiling.

"In here," the officer said, closing the door behind Mat, "all the persons in the Academy keep their valuables. Each one has a drawer and no two keys are alike. No one is allowed to enter here in the absence of the paymaster, and only he and I are supposed to know the combinations which open the outer door and the door of the safe."

General Earl advanced and placed one hand on the knob of the safe.

"I'll open this," he said, as he proceeded to do so, "and show you where the money was placed by Mason. I saw him put it there immediately after I gave it to him."

The interior of the safe was fitted up in the usual style with small drawers, apartments for books and papers, and a large space in the center. Toward the latter the general pointed as he went on.

"In there the money was placed, and to get it the thief had to open both the outer door and this one. Only Mason and myself knew the combinations—or ought to have known them—and so suspicion was at once directed to the paymaster. I was able to prove an *alibi*."

Mat examined the safe, but could discover no signs of violence. It had evidently not been forced open, and he said as much.

"No one would have suspected Mason," continued the officer, "for he is a fellow one would never take for a thief, had it not been for his suspicious actions since the robbery was committed. He refuses to say where he was the night before last, and his room-mate, Lieutenant Benton, is positive that he was not in bed until nearly daylight. It looks bad, but I can't believe he took the money."

"Where is he now?" asked Mat.

"I don't know. He's been paroled in charge of two officers, and I told them to bring him here in the morning so as to see you. They'll be along presently. In the mean time I wish you'd ask me any questions you want to about the affair. In that way you can quicker learn the whole story, or as much of it as you care to know."

Mat nodded.

"The money, you say," he began, "was in gold?"

"Yes."

"Was it in bulk—loose?"

"Yes; Mason piled it up in the large apart-

ment in the safe. Most of it consisted of ten and twenty-dollar pieces."

"Are any of the students here at all intimate with the paymaster?"

"Most of them are. He is a nice sort of fellow, as I said before, and every one in the Academy likes him."

"But are there no persons with whom he is unusually friendly?"

"Not that I know of."

"Is he poor—low down financially, I mean?"

"No; his salary is large, and he does not have use for more money, I should judge."

"What does he know about this thing? Has he any clues to advance?"

"No, nor any one else. The case is very simple: We placed the money in the safe at night—about seven o'clock—and twelve hours later it was gone. Both doors were locked, and everything seemed to be in its usual order."

"Who discovered that the gold was missing?"

"Mason. He came here earlier than usual yesterday morning to make out his pay-roll for the month, and soon discovered the loss. I was absent at the time, and did not learn of it until a short time after."

"Did any one except the paymaster know that you had received the money?"

"No—that is, except Benton. Mason said he had told his room-mate, but of course that don't amount to anything."

"What sort of a fellow is this Benton?"

"Straight as a die—one of the finest soldiers and smartest scholars in the Academy."

"It was he, you say, that told of Mason's being out at night, wasn't it?"

"Yes."

"Does Mason deny that?"

"No."

"But he won't say where he was, eh?"

"Thus far he has refused."

"And no one else knows anything about the affair?"

"I think not."

The detective chewed a toothpick reflectively, regarded the stripe down the side of his trousers for a moment and then set his cap firmly on his head.

"What have you done regarding this matter thus far?" he asked, rising from a stool and walking toward the door. "Have you arrested any one but the paymaster?"

"No. He is the only one we have any cause for suspecting. I have absolutely made no progress in the matter and shall trust entirely to your shrewdness. It is not so much the recovery of the money which you are to aim at as the arrest and conviction of the thieves. If you do get back the gold and bring to justice the persons who stole it I can promise you a good share of it for your labor."

"Thank you," responded the detective. "I can get on very well now, but before you go I wish you would explain to me the rules of the Academy and how it would be possible for a cadet to do this thing."

This the general proceeded to do and so much in detail that it need not be recorded here. He outlined the life of the student at the school and sketched the plans of the building. Besides this he gave Mat much general and useful information, without which it would be difficult for him to get on very well in the Academy.

Having done so, the two left the room and walked together toward the drill-hall.

"I don't want to be seen in your company," the officer said, "for it might excite comment. If you'll come up to my room now, I'll write you out a furlough, and that will give you the liberty of the Academy grounds. Then I'll get one of the boys whom I can trust to go with you to the drill-hall, and he will point out to you some of the cadets you ought to know."

"All right," replied Mat.

A few minutes later, in company with a cadet from the first class, he was standing in the entrance to the drill-hall watching his companions going through the manual of arms. In summer and in fair weather at all times, these exercises are conducted out on the campus, but on this occasion the lawn was too wet to admit of the drills being held there.

"Is Lieutenant Benton here?" asked Mat as he glanced along the lines.

"Yes, sir," replied his companion. "He's in command of the third company—the one who just moved his men clear around. He's facing this way now."

"I see him," replied the detective. "And now I wish you'd show me the paymaster of the Academy—Mason, I believe his name is."

"He's not here."

"Why not?"

"Because he's not a field officer usually, and has nothing to do with the drills."

The first class cadet looked at Mat suspiciously when he began to display his lack of knowledge regarding military matters. He evidently thought that the detective was guying him.

"Have you seen Mason this morning?" asked Mat, disregarding his companion's suspicions.

"No. He may be in his office. How is it that you stand in with the general so solid? And why do you wear a third-class uniform if you're a plebe?"

A "plebe" in West Point parlance is a cadet just admitted to the Academy.

"There were no other uniforms to fit me," replied Mat, carelessly, "and I wanted to see how I'd look in one."

"I see," replied the other. "When I came here nearly four years ago I was just as anxious to get into the things. Now I'm as anxious to get out of them. I haven't had a furlough in eighteen months—honestly, I mean. Of course I do the sneak act at night occasionally. Lately we haven't done anything because some of the boys have been raising the deuce so frequently that if I were to be caught, I'd get the blame for all that's been done. The others think the same way, and so they lay low."

"I suppose that's the way it stands," Mat said, "but I haven't got on to these things yet. How do you manage to get out at night?"

"You'll learn quick enough if you get a decent roomer. I shouldn't be surprised if they put you in with young Harry Zelds. He's alone just now, and you couldn't get into better company. He's very chummy with Lieutenant Benton, and—Hello!"

The speaker stopped suddenly and turned toward the furthest end of the room. All the students were drawn up in regular lines with their eyes fixed on General Earl. The commanding officer stood upon a slightly raised platform and had just begun to address the cadets.

He was telling them of the robbery. He went over all the pranks that had been cut up within the past month, and compared them with the actual crime of stealing the gold.

"Then he invited the thief, if present, to come to his office later in the day, and was about to outline the advantages of so doing, when a very much excited adjutant walked rapidly toward him."

The two officers exchanged salutes, and then the adjutant handed General Earl a slip of paper.

Its effect was magical.

CHAPTER IV.

MORE MYSTERY.

PAYMASTER MASON was in the first class at the Military Academy. He had been at West Point for more than two years and was considered one of the best officers there. He was popular among his classmates as well as with the faculty of the institution. For the purpose of introducing him to the reader we will go back to the evening preceding the robbery.

After placing the gold, as the general had said, in the largest recess of the safe, he had received from the Academy postmaster a letter addressed to him. It read as follows:

"NEW YORK CITY, May 13th.

"MY DEAR DICK:—

"I shall be up to see you this evening at the usual time and place. I am here on a short visit at my uncle's and cannot go back without meeting you. If you cannot come, would you be able to get a furlough for a day and run down to the city to see me?"

"Affectionately yours,

"CARRIE."

Mason was one of the few cadets who did not take genuine pride in outwitting the guards and in escaping from the Academy building at night. He had done so once or twice since his arrival at West Point, but his secret expeditions were pardonable to any one except an army officer, to whom sentiment is a thing unknown. The paymaster came from a town in Ohio and in that same town lived an exceedingly pretty young lady by the name of Carrie Winthrop. The young soldier and Carrie had long been friends and everything seemed to indicate that in time they would become something more.

Every summer Miss Winthrop visited a relative in New York, and Mason never failed to visit her at these times. Finding it impossible to do so with the permission of his superior officer, the impetuosity of the true lover came to his aid and he threw the rules of the Academy to the winds. Miss Carrie and he would meet each other at no great distance from "quarters,"

and together they would take long walks by the side of the silent river. And perhaps these meetings were the more enjoyable because they were forbidden. They would discuss the happy time when the young officer should don his shoulder-straps and leave the Academy behind him as he entered the regular army with a well-earned commission and an ample salary. All this was contrary to the regulations of the military institution, but Mason did not mind that. He was a faithful officer and a hard-working student, and he would have welcomed a court-martial rather than miss his few but enjoyable meetings with Miss Winthrop.

And thus matters stood when he received the letter printed above.

Mason did not hesitate regarding the course he was to pursue in the matter. He had not seen the young lady in a long time, and her coming was to him a most welcome surprise. He destroyed the letter as soon as he had read it and retired earlier than usual.

Lieutenant Benton, with whom he shared his room, was made aware of the fact that Mason intended to make a midnight excursion. And although this was a most unusual thing on the part of the young officer, the lieutenant expressed no surprise and asked no questions. He did the same thing too often himself, to forfeit the confidence his room-mate placed in him. As has been said before, the faculty did not recognize sentiment of any sort and would punish with equal severity a cadet who went to meet his lady-love and one who was engaged in a scheme to rob a neighboring orchard or melon-patch.

And so, late in the evening and not many hours before the safe was opened and the gold taken, the young paymaster stole out of the Academy building and made his way toward the river. The young lady whom he was to meet had come up from the city with the day steamer, and intended to return with the one leaving some time before midnight.

Mason met her presently, and the two walked and talked the happy moments away until the whistling of the returning boat acquainted her with the fact that it was time for them to part. Bidding her an affectionate farewell and promising to see her under better circumstances at no late day, Mason walked back to the building. He did not dare accompany her to the landing for fear of being recognized. When he reached his room again he found Lieutenant Benton fast asleep and at once turned in himself.

The next morning he awoke at the sound of the daybreak gun, and—being an officer to whom that privilege was extended—arose almost immediately and went to his office for the purpose of making out the monthly pay-roll.

It was then that he discovered the loss of the gold.

At once there flashed across his mind the fact that suspicion must attach itself to him. Only he and General Earl had known of the whereabouts of the money, and of course no one would accuse the commanding officer of taking it. Lieutenant Benton would be forced to tell of his absence from his room the night before, and this was something he could not account for. He would have cut off his right arm rather than place Miss Winthrop in a position that might embarrass her. No matter how well he knew that their meeting had been an entirely proper one and fully justified by force of circumstances, other persons would not take such a view of it. How could he explain away these things?

This passed through his mind the moment he saw that the money had been stolen. He did not even think of looking for a clue that might direct him to the real thief, or of giving the alarm with the required promptness.

For some minutes he leaned against the iron door of the safe, and gazed blankly at the place where he had piled in neat rows the heavy yellow coins.

Not one was left.

He knew that there could be no mistake about their having been stolen. Only he and the general could have taken them lawfully, and even if the latter was in the Academy, he could have no possible cause for so doing. Mason did not try to think who the thief really was. His thoughts were too busy in solving the question regarding his own actions in the matter. What was he to say in reference to his absence during the night? How would the faculty regard his refusal to disclose his purpose in leaving the building so surreptitiously?

He could answer neither question satisfactorily, and after turning the matter over in his mind half a dozen times, he resolved to do the best thing possible under the circumstances—send out an alarm. This he did, and so effectually that an instant later the little room was

filled with an excited crowd of officers and scholars.

"The safe has been robbed," Mason said. "Twenty thousand dollars in gold was taken from it last night."

He was conscious of a peculiar glance from Lieutenant Benton, and then he told them as much as he knew of the theft. Colonel Wentworth, next in command to General Earl, assumed charge of affairs and ordered the cadets back to "quarters." Then he listened to what Mason had to say, told the students who knew what had happened to say nothing about it and rested the matter there until the coming of the general.

The commanding officer, upon his arrival, was at once made acquainted with the state of affairs. It was he who discovered, from Lieutenant Benton's voluntary confession, that he knew of Mason's absence. And it was he, too, to whom the young paymaster declared the impossibility of making known his whereabouts the night before. General Earl was both surprised and angered by this, and promptly placed the obdurate officer under arrest.

Then he sent to New York for a detective, and this brings us back to the meeting in the drill-hall.

"Mason has escaped!"

The general uttered these words and then dropped the paper and whirled about.

"Fall in!"

The command rung out sharp and clear.

"Counter—right—forward march!"

The long lines of uniformed cadets filed out with regular tread, and the commanding officer started on a run to his office. There he found awaiting him the two officers whom he had detailed to guard the paymaster.

"What does this mean?" he cried, as he preceded the adjutant into the room. "Where is Mason?"

"He escaped from us some time during the night," one of the men replied, with a salute. "We did not discover it until just now."

"How—where was he? Where did he go? Quick!"

"He got away through the window. It was so far from the ground that we did not think he would dare jump it. He must have got away safely, however, for there is nothing to indicate that he was injured. As soon as we made the discovery that he was gone we sent the adjutant to you."

Something very much like a curse fell from the lips of the old soldier.

"Detail twenty men from the first class to hunt him down. You, Hargrave, may go in charge of them. Don't stop until you get the rascal in your hands, if you have to chase him all over the country."

Another salute, and the eldest of the two officers disappeared outside. Accompanied by the adjutant and the other one, General Earl dashed down stairs and held a short consultation with Colonel Wentworth and the other members of his staff.

The result of this was that martial law, in its strictest form, was declared to prevail in all the departments of the institution.

The general was resolved to sift the matter to the bottom, cost what it might. But a more potent factor than the commanding officer was working in the case, and the result of his exciting labors were soon seen.

In other words, Mat Murray had just become interested.

CHAPTER V.

A FEW HOURS LATER.

"CURSE YOU!" cried an angry and excited voice, "what do you mean by your infernal meddling?"

It was the voice of Sergeant Buck Larmount. He had scarcely given utterance to the exclamation before he turned and struck a savage blow with his flat square at the face of the young man to whom he was speaking. The latter dodged, drew back his right arm, and then sent it straight out from the shoulder.

Larmount flew backward and measured his length upon the green sward.

"Keep off," said his opponent, quietly. "I did not know that I had done anything to offend you. Isn't the money yours?"

"No."

"But you dropped it."

"You lie, curse you!"

"What's the matter with you, anyhow? Why do you get so excited just because I offer you a twenty-dollar gold-piece which you dropped from your pocket a moment ago when you pulled out your handkerchief?"

The sergeant rose to his feet and glared angrily at the young man who had knocked him down, as he replied, with an attempt at gaining his self-possession:

"I got angry because I don't like your impudence. And before you've been here twenty-four hours longer you'll be sorry you acted so confounded fresh."

The other smiled carelessly, settled his cap on his head, and prepared to resume his walk toward the river.

"Then you really won't take back the money you lost?"

"I tell you that I didn't lose it."

"But I am certain that you did. I saw you, just a moment ago, drop it out of your pocket."

"I know better!" cried the other, angrily.

"Very well, then; I'll pocket the coin myself. I don't care about robbing you, but if you insist that you don't want it, why—"

"But I didn't drop it."

"All right. I won't try to convince you that you did. I'm sure I can find use for the money. Good-morning."

Larmount returned the salutation with a muttered oath, and the two separated, Buck going on toward the Academy building, and the other continuing his walk in the direction of the river.

The young man who had knocked down the angry sergeant was Mat Murray.

All the morning he had been working on the case, and this was the first sign of success. He had noted the cadets that acted in any way suspiciously, and had tried the same experiment on them all.

In Buck's case it worked to a charm.

The detective approached him from behind, just after the sergeant had used his handkerchief, and tendered him a twenty-dollar gold-piece, with the words:

"You just dropped this, sir."

From the fellow's agitation, and subsequent behavior, Mat knew that his clever but simple scheme had been successful.

He was on the right track at last!

The blow he had struck Larmount was entirely in self-defense, for the angry sergeant was thoroughly in earnest when he struck at him.

Mat made no attempt at following Buck, for he was too shrewd a worker to still further arouse the suspicion of the man by so doing. Instead, he walked down toward the river, to see if he could clear up the mystery of the tragedy he had witnessed in the early hours of the morning. It was not improbable that this was in some way connected with the robbery.

He made his way to the place where he had left the boat in which he had rowed across the river. He had no difficulty in finding it, and at once set out to discover its owner. An inquiry from the first boatman he met was by no means fruitless.

"Do you know who owns this boat?" shouted the detective to a man who was coming toward him, with a pair of oars over either shoulder.

"That's Hen Phillips's boat," replied the person addressed, readily. "He was just wondering why you didn't bring it back sooner."

"And where is Hen Phillips?" asked Mat.

The man stopped short.

"Don't you know?"

"No."

"Didn't you hire that craft of him last night?"

"No."

"Oh-ho!"

This seemed to satisfy the individual on the bank, for he resumed his walk again as he answered over his shoulder:

"Phillips's place is the first boat-house you come to after the big dock. You'll see his sign up. Gosh darn me if you soldiers hain't the blamest funniest people I ever see."

Mat thought the man had good reason to make the remark as he threw off the painter. Then he sat down, twisted his fingers around the ends of the oars and sent the light boat spinning out into the river.

He had little difficulty in finding the Phillips boat-house, and still less in discovering its proprietor. The latter had been awaiting the return of his property, he said, for precisely eight hours and twenty-five minutes. And before he would answer any of the detective's questions, Mat had to pay him for the time specified.

"Who was it that hired this boat of you, last night?" he began, as soon as the financial matter was settled satisfactorily.

"I dunno."

"One of the students?"

"Yes."

"Did you ever see him before?"

"No."

"What sort of a looking chap was he?"

The boatman grew restless under the cross-examination, and retreated again behind his—

"I dunno."

"Was he an officer?"

"I reckon he wuz. Leastwise he had on one of them caps. Watcher wanter know fer?"

"Because I'd like to find out if he was a friend of mine whom I was expecting to go out with."

"Then you ain't a-goin' to blow on me for rentin' him the boat?"

"Of course not."

This seemed to relieve Mr. Phillips not a little, and he answered more readily:

"He was one of them lieutenants."

Mat was agreeably disappointed. He expected to be told that it was the paymaster who had gone out in the skiff, and who had committed self-murder.

"Was he a tall, dark man, with a small, black mustache?"

"No, he didn't have no mustache, but he wuz black enough."

"What do you mean?"

"He was a colored man."

A low whistle escaped the detective.

"A colored man, eh? Did you notice anything else?"

"No, I reckon not, except that his clothes didn't fit him."

"About what time did he hire the boat?"

"I dunno prezactly. Before midnight, I guess."

"Was any one with him?"

"No."

"Did he have anything in his hands?"

"I didn't notice."

"Do you know which way he went?"

"No."

Having pumped Mr. Phillips dry, Mat thanked him for his information and left, cautioning him not to mention the fact of his visit to anybody.

"I won't," the boatman said. "I knowed you was up to some more of your durned tricks, but it weren't none of my business."

The detective nodded and walked slowly away from the boat-house.

A few minutes later he startled General Earl, in his office, by inquiring abruptly whether or not there was a lieutenant in the Academy who was a colored man.

"There is not," replied the general.

"Are any colored men employed about the building or grounds?"

"Not that I know of."

Mat did not ask any further questions, but turned and walked in his careless fashion out toward the gymnasium. There he found a number of the cadets, swinging upon parallel bars, throwing Indian clubs, and going through all sorts of muscular exercises.

He entered, and before long was astonishing the students, with whom he entered into competition in the throwing of a fifty-pound cannon ball. He was engaged in this pleasant pastime when, glancing suddenly out of the window, a group on the lawn attracted his attention. It consisted of Lieutenant Benton and a middle-aged colored man. The detective promptly sent the shot flying to the other end of the long room, and then, excusing himself from the admiring cadets, walked outside.

Just as he did so the two men whom he had noticed separated. The lieutenant came toward the Academy, while his companion started in the direction of the river.

Paying no attention to the former, Mat strolled across the campus after the colored man. He descended the embankment, reached the railroad track, and then started at a brisk pace up the river. The detective followed him for fully half a mile, and then the man left the track and struck off into the woods. Mat kept close behind him.

A hundred yards back from the river, but completely hidden from observation, stood a good-sized, strongly-built log cabin. From its appearance the detective judged that it contained two, and, perhaps, three rooms. A brick chimney, built on one side, emitted a thin line of gray smoke, and a huge dog rushed out with an angry roar at the sound of footsteps. The roar changed to a yelp of delight when the beast recognized the colored man, and the latter was obliged to kick him vigorously to make him cease barking.

Then the man unlocked the door of the cabin and entered, leaving the dog crouching on the outside.

Mat took up a position in plain view of the building, and glanced at his watch.

It was nearly noon.

For some minutes he sat behind the trunk of a large tree, and kept his eyes fastened upon the

cabin. The smoke coming from the brick chimney increased in volume, but there were no other signs of the colored man's presence. The dog, recovering from the disappointment of not being allowed to enter, now showed a disposition to wander about in the vicinity of the building. At one time he came dangerously near to the detective's hiding-place, and Mat's hand clasped the butt of his revolver, to be used in case of an emergency.

The moments passed quickly while he sat there, and it might have been half an hour before another human form appeared within his range of vision.

This time, from the direction of the Academy, a young man in uniform emerged from the surrounding forest into the clearing, glanced quickly about him and then ran toward the door. He knocked lightly, motioned away the dog, and was admitted a moment later by the occupant of the cabin. Mat remained in his position behind the tree, keeping a sharp watch on the building to see if any one else entered or left it, for nearly half an hour afterward. At the end of that time he was very much surprised to see the cadet who had entered the cabin a short time before, making his way through the woods from the river. The detective made sure that he was not mistaken in the student, and then walked in a wide detour around to the other side of the cabin. He was positive that the fellow had not come out of the front door and he was unable to discover any other means of exit.

The detective was puzzled.

He examined the building closely from all sides, but could see no way of getting out of it except by the main entrance. And while he was puzzling his brain over the matter, he caught sight of another form moving off through the woods.

It was the colored man.

Mat turned and hastened toward the place where the fellow had so suddenly appeared. He could discover nothing that would account for the men's strange actions. There was evidently some secret, underground exit from the cabin and the detective determined to find it.

The cadet had disappeared in the forest, but the darky was still visible, making his way in the same direction. Toward him Mat bent his footsteps, resolving to follow him until the mystery of the cabin was cleared up. The building itself would be at his disposal at any time.

The man hurried along through the woods for some distance, and then turned toward the river and descended the embankment to the railroad track.

Mat followed him.

There he hesitated for a moment and then continued on his way toward the Academy. Reaching the depot he entered it and approached the telegraph office. Handing the operator a slip of paper, he said:

"I wish you'd send that right away, will you?"

"I guess so," replied Jackson, glancing over the paper. "Collect at the other end?"

"Yes, sah. A young leddy jest give it to me to han' to you."

"All right, I'll attend to it."

"Thank you, sah."

The darky turned about and was soon on his way back to his cabin.

Mat approached within hearing distance of the sounding-board, and listened to the operator while he sent the message. The detective was able to translate it as fast as Jackson worked the keys. This is what it was:

"WEST POINT, May 15th.

"JACOB A. WINTHROP,

Mansion Building, N. Y. City:—

"I am safe. Don't worry. Will be home tomorrow. You need not come up."

"CARRIE."

The detective's brow wrinkled into a deep frown.

"What the deuce does this mean?" he muttered to himself. "Can it be that I am not on the right track?"

CHAPTER VI.

AN UNDERGROUND ADVENTURE.

MAT abandoned his pursuit of the colored gentleman, and again turned his face toward the Academy building. He did not think it best to tell the general of the tragedy he had witnessed the night before, because he could see no good that could arise from so doing.

Nothing happened during the remainder of the day that is worthy of being recorded, but at night began the series of startling adventures which culminated in the clearing up of the West Point mystery.

It was after nine o'clock that Mat, hiding behind a row of shrubbery, saw two dark forms emerge from the building and hurry silently across the lawn. He had been awaiting them for fully an hour, and at once started in pursuit. They passed on toward the river, descended the embankment to the railroad track, and then started forward on a dog-trot.

Mat followed them.

They kept almost in the tracks of the colored man until they reached the place at which he had turned into the woods. There they turned aside and went a considerable distance further up the road, to a place where the embankment was steep and rocky. Up this they clambered, and passed along a narrow ledge at the top for some distance. Suddenly they disappeared.

In the dim starlight Mat was unable to observe their movements very closely, but he at once set out to follow them. Making as little noise as possible, he climbed up the rocks in the course taken by the two men who had preceded him, and at last reached the ledge in safety. It was narrow, and led to a steep wall of rock extending out at an angle some distance away. Slowly and carefully the detective stepped along until his hands clasped the piece which jutted out.

Then he was able to account for the sudden disappearance of the two cadets.

A hole two feet in diameter was visible, extending downward at the junction of the main rock and the piece which had apparently been constructed by nature to hide it.

Without a moment's hesitation, Mat swung his feet into the aperture and slid down. He landed at no great distance on soft earth and felt about him in the intense darkness with his hands. Straight ahead there was an opening large enough to crawl into on his hands and knees, and this the detective proceeded to do at once. The sides, top and bottom of the tunnel were of damp earth, and occasionally it took a wide detour to avoid a rock. Although not in reality more than a hundred yards long, it seemed to Mat before he reached the end to be more than double that.

His first intimation of having reached the end of his journey came with a sharp bump of his head against a bank of earth. The next consisted in hearing voices engaged in conversation directly above him.

Glancing up he saw the lighted cracks of a closed trap-door and knew that he was in the subterranean passageway beneath the cabin. Rising to his feet he was able to hear the words uttered without difficulty:

"I hain't a-givin' you no reason why you can't see the man," the darky was saying. "Hits enough fer me to say that he's in the room safe and sound. I've got my reasons fer keepin' you away from him, I tole yer, and I don't see what diff'rence hit makes to you."

"And I don't see why in blazes you won't let us take a glance at the fellow. It looks mighty suspicious, Sam."

"It does that," exclaimed a third voice. "If I thought he was going back on us—"

"I hain't," interposed the colored man, "an' in good time I'll tell you why you can't go in thar now. There's sunthin' pow'ful funny about this, an' I can't understan' it nohow."

"That's all the more reason why you shouldn't try to keep this thing to yourself," the second voice, which the detective recognized as Buck Larmount's, went on again.

"Tell us what's up and we may be able to help you. Don't act like a fool in this matter, Sam; it's too serious altogether."

"That's jist it. Hit's too durned ser'us. But fer all th t, I can't let you see the man we ketch'd—not ter-night anyway. It won't do nohow."

The man spoke so earnestly that he impressed the excited cadets with his sincerity. Nevertheless Buck said sharply:

"Confound you, Sam, I believe you're lying to us. If that man has escaped and you are trying to hide it from us—"

"I hain't," interposed the colored man.

"Well, then, let it go at that, but mind you that we intend to stand no more of this foolishness. It is the merest nonsense to keep the fellow we captured locked up in there and because of a whim of yours you refuse to let us see him."

"It is that," assented the other cadet. "But so long as Sam keeps him secure until we think of some way of disposing of him it don't matter so much. There's no doubt about his being the detective the general sent for, is there, Sam?"

"I—I reckon not," said the colored man, uneasily.

"Then keep him securely confined until to-

morrow night, when we will come around again. We just came here to-night to see what sort of a fellow we had caught."

It was the sergeant who spoke and then, bidding Sam good-night, the two cadets moved across the floor toward the trap-door.

Mat heard them coming and began to crawl back toward the opening of the tunnel. He had proceeded half-way before he made a most startling discovery, and came to an abrupt halt.

Some one was calling in his direction from the outer end of the passageway!

He could hear the breathing of the person as he struggled slowly along, and his hand moved around to his hip-pocket when he realized the danger of his strange position.

Buck Larmount and the cadet were coming toward him from the cabin and a stranger—without doubt one of the enemy—blocked escape in front. It was in all truth a most perilous situation and one which would tax to the utmost the skill and courage of the young detective.

Mat drew his revolver and placed it in his mouth. Gripping it securely he continued on his way for a few yards and then came to a halt.

The man ahead slowly approached. Mat braced himself well against both sides of the narrow tunnel and grasped the butt of his revolver in his left hand.

Nearer and nearer came the stranger.

He was almost upon the detective before the latter's right arm shot out and his sinewy fingers were twisted about the neck of his opponent. There was no struggle—no outcry. The man lay limp and passive in the young detective's powerful grip, his surprise and fright evidently aiding in bringing about the state of affairs which Mat desired.

"Don't utter a sound," whispered the detective pressing the cold muzzle of the revolver against the man's temple, "or I will put a bullet in you."

Then he replaced the weapon and with his left hand brought out of the side-pocket of his coat a pair of handcuffs. These he had little difficulty in placing upon the hands of his prisoner, who seemed to be absolutely helpless and nearly frightened to death.

Mat could hear the two cadets closing the trap-door as they descended into the other end of the tunnel and at once recognized the necessity of using haste. He had handcuffed the man on the impulse of the moment for the purpose of preventing him from using his weapons when the detective started to crawl out of the passageway.

This he now tried to do, but without success. The tunnel was too narrow to admit of the passage of more than one person at a time. The detective was as effectually blocked as if his prisoner had held the right-of-way with a cocked revolver.

And all the time the two cadets were drawing nearer and nearer.

"It looks to me," muttered Mat to himself, "as though there was going to be a lively kind of a racket in this vicinity pretty soon. I wonder if it's possible for to turn around."

It wasn't.

One trial convinced him of that fact, for he had encountered the stranger in the narrowest portion of the tunnel, which was at no point very wide. He crawled backward for some distance and at length when within a half-dozen yards of the two cadets, managed to reverse himself by reaching a portion of the passageway wider than the rest.

Planting his feet firmly, he grasped his revolver and awaited the approach of the two students.

They were almost within touching distance of Mat, when from the other end of the tunnel sounded the voice of the colored man:

"Say, boys!"

"Hello!" shouted Buck in reply, halting and turning his head. "What do you want?"

"The lieutenant is here; he done jist come in, an' wants to see you. He says for you to come back an' go out de front way."

"We can't turn around in this accursed place," growled the sergeant, after making the attempt.

"Crawl back'ards," came Sam's voice, sounding strangely hollow in the underground passage. "Hit ain't fur to the end, an' thar you kin stand up."

From the succeeding movements on the part of Buck and his companion, Mat knew that they were trying to follow the colored man's advice. If it was slow work to proceed face forward in the narrow tunnel, it was twice as difficult to

make any sort of speed in crawling backward. The two students soon realized this, and they made the close air of the place sulphurous with their invectives. Before they reached the trap-door, Buck had anathematized everything in and about or connected in any possible way with the tunnel and its general make-up. And a hoarse chuckle from Sam did not serve to lighten their spirits.

"Don't swar so," he advised, as they drew nearer and the import of their utterances became audible. "Watchu mean by saying that the fellow who built dis tunnel was an eberlasting jackass? Mebbe you t'ink— Look out now; there you are!"

Two dirty forms crawled up through the trap-door. The first words which greeted the detective when he drew near enough to overhear the conversation were uttered by the sergeant.

"I wouldn't go through that cursed tunnel again for one hundred dollars!"

His companion assented to the proposition, raising the amount, however, to five hundred.

"And now that we're back here," Buck went on, evidently addressing the new-comer, designated by Sam as the lieutenant, "I'd like very much to know what you want."

"I'll tell you," answered the person addressed, and Mat's surmise that it was Lieutenant Benton proved to be correct. "I'll tell you as we walk back home. There can be no doubt of the safety of our going out the front way. I've already spoiled one uniform in that God-forsaken tunnel, and don't propose to risk another one."

"All right," said Buck, "we're ready to start now."

"Then come on. I just came around to see how our prisoner was, and Sam says that he's keeping him secure, but won't let me take a look at him."

"He's told us the same story, and I think it's pretty blanked strange, don't you?"

"I don't know. Sam is all straight enough, and so long as he keeps the fellow secure we'll let him go. He seems to be certain that he really is the Secret Service detective that General Earl sent for. Come on now, boys, and look out for that blasted dog! He's the worst brute alive, and I'll put a bullet in him the next time he growls at me, so help me Moses. So-long, Sam."

"Good-night, sab," replied the colored man, closing the door after them and locking it.

This much Mat heard and then all was quiet again overhead. He made no attempt at leaving the tunnel, for he was resolved to search the cabin before daylight dawned. He could not understand the reference to a Secret Service officer's being kept a prisoner by the darky, but the fact certainly required investigation, and he determined to investigate it without delay. The man whom he had handcuffed under such peculiar circumstances would have to get along as best he could until Mat returned.

Presently the light, shining through the cracks of the trap-door above him, went out. The sound of some one's throwing himself upon a creaking couch was audible, and the detective realized that Sam had retired for the night.

For some time he waited in the darkness with his revolver clasped in one hand, and it was not until the sound of snoring was wafted to his listening ears that he made preparations for starting on his dangerous venture.

Rising to his feet, he shoved back the trap-door and stood with his head and shoulders above the floor of the cabin. Then, reaching out with his hands, he grasped the sides and swung himself up.

CHAPTER VII. IMPRISONED.

THE interior of the cabin was not illumined by a single ray of light. All about the detective was the most intense darkness as he sat on the edge of the trap-door with his legs dangling into the aperture.

From one corner of the room came the sound of snoring—the only noise that was audible to Mat's ears.

For a moment he remained in this position, and then, drawing up his legs, he arose to his feet. With his revolver firmly clasped in one hand and with the other outstretched before him, he advanced noiselessly toward the bed, upon which lay the sleeping form of the colored man.

Crash!

The detective moved very carefully so as to avoid accidents, but of a sudden one of his feet caught in the leg of a small table, and it fell to the floor with noise enough to justify Sam in the belief that the cabin had been struck by an earthquake.

As soon as Mat realized what he had done, he stopped short and held his breath. The fall of the table had made a tremendous noise in the narrow confines of the room, and the detective thought it scarcely possible that the colored man could remain asleep. The loud snoring suddenly ceased, and then Mat knew by the movement in the bed that Sam had sat up.

"Who dah?"

The words were uttered in a steady voice, and were followed by a suggestive click. The man had cocked a revolver.

"Who dah?" he demanded again. "If you don't speak, I'll shoot!"

The detective moved noiselessly to the left. The weapon in his hand was a self-cocker, and a slight pressure of the finger would send a .32-caliber bullet whizzing toward the speaker, if Mat so desired.

"I bear yo'," cried the colored man, angrily, "an' ef yo' don't speak, I'll pull de trigger."

The first assertion was a false one, for Mat was not making a sound. He doubted very much, too, if Sam was sincere in the latter threat, because he could see no benefit that would accrue to either of them by his speaking. It was his scheme to get near enough to the darky to grapple with him, and thus do away with the pistol-shots.

Crack!

Sam had fired.

The bullet whizzed close to the detective's ears and struck the wall behind him. A sharp click announced the fact that the colored man was prepared to shoot again at a moment's notice.

"Whoebber yo' be, yo'd best—"

He was suddenly and violently interrupted by the detective, who had thrown himself upon his opponent. Sam's weapon was knocked from his hand and fell to the floor. Mat shoved his into the side-pocket of his coat, and then—

A most terrific struggle overturned the couch, and the two men fell to the floor. They were pretty evenly matched, although Sam was somewhat the larger of the two, and his arms were considerably larger than Mat's. Neither uttered a word, but their breath, drawn in short gasps, showed how hard they were fighting for supremacy.

Perhaps a couple of minutes had passed, but it seemed an age to the struggling men, when a dim light, shining through the doorway to the right, cast an uncertain radiance about the disordered apartment.

Mat, catching a quick glimpse in that direction, saw a white-robed figure standing there, with a lighted candle extended at arm's-length. In the other hand was held a dangerous-looking hickory club. He did not see the face, and before he could note anything further, his struggles with the colored man had turned his face in the opposite direction.

Sam evidently became aware of the presence of the person in the doorway as soon as did his opponent. He husbanded his breath for a few seconds, and then jerked out:

"Fetch him—a lick over the—head—with the—club!"

A moment's violent struggling, and then he panted out again:

"Hit him quick—he's killing me! Hard—that's it!"

The detective heard soft footsteps behind him, and then a ringing, roaring pain burst through his head, and he fell back unconscious to the floor, still clasping in his powerful arms the form of his antagonist.

"I thought I—was a—goner, sure," panted Sam, falling back, and lying there, puffing and blowing like an overworked steam-engine. "You saved my life and yourn, I reckon, by this. Pull him off, will you; my strength's all—gone."

The white-robed figure bent down, after a moment's hesitation, and seized the inanimate detective by the shoulders. He was dragged back a foot or more, and then the colored man arose with a perceptible stagger, and sunk into a chair. His exertions had completely exhausted him, and for fully five minutes he sat there, panting and perspiring, neither he nor his companion venturing a word.

Finally, having recovered to some extent, he stood the couch upon its feet again, and with trembling hands lit the lamp upon the mantel-piece. It shed a brilliant ray of light over the overturned furniture of the room, and disclosed the open trap-door in one corner. It showed the mode of entrance which his midnight visitor had taken, and then, without glancing at the prostrate body on the floor, he turned to his companion.

"You'd best go back to bed now," he said.

"This is one of the students who wanted ter see yo' a while ago, an' becase I wouldn't let him in, he went fer me. I'll tend to him now—good-night!"

Without saying a word, the white-robed figure, with a face as pale as its ghostly costume, disappeared through the doorway as silently as it had come. The door was closed, and then, with a fiendish grin upon his face, the darky turned and held the lamp close to the features of the unconscious man at his feet.

A tiny stream of blood trickled between the black, curling hair of the detective's head, and formed a small pool upon the oilcloth beneath it. A bunch as large as a goose-egg was already visible, and showed where the hickory club had fallen.

"It was a good job," muttered Sam, returning the lamp to the mantel, and then bending over the unconscious man again. "But wh'd 'a' thought she'd done it! Durn me ef I wuzn't afeard it'd be me she'd welt with ther club. It wuz lucky she heard me a-steerin' of them cadets away from her room. That giv' her the corr'ct idee."

The man then knelt down and produced some stout cords from his pocket. Turning the detective over on his face, he roughly jerked his hands together, and proceeded to bind them tightly in that position.

"I dunno who in-blazes he is," he said, half aloud, "but he won't never git out of this shanty till I'm safe off, now I tole yo'. I reckon mebbe he's one of them students who wuz prowlin' around, and struck the hole in the rock by accident. It'll be a durn sorry accident fer him and— But, gewhittaker! how 'is did fight!"

The exclamation was called forth by a sudden twinge in Sam's shoulder, as he drew the cords binding his prisoner together.

"I wonder ef he's got anything valuable in his pockets. I reckon—"

He was interrupted by the opening of the door to his right.

"Is—is he hurt very badly?" inquired a timid voice from that direction.

"No," replied Sam, gruffly.

"I didn't mean to hit him so hard, but I was so frightened that I—"

"You did jest right," interposed the darky. "Now go back to bed."

"Then the man will get over the effects of the blow soon?"

"I reckon."

"I'm so glad," the voice went on, with a sigh of relief. "I'll go back now and— Sam!"

"Well?"

"You won't forgot your promise to release me to-morrow?"

"Not ef yo' keep yo'r agreement."

"I certainly shall."

The figure disappeared again and the door closed. Had the detective heard the musical voice and listened to the short conversation that ensued, it is safe to say that he would have been more than puzzled regarding the outcome of the whole thing. But as it was, Mat did not overhear a word, and even when the colored man had bound him securely, hand and foot, he was still insensible to his surroundings.

Sam, having confined his prisoner's limbs beyond any danger of his being able to release himself, now carried Mat to the open trap-door. Lowering his feet first, he slid his captive down into the damp passageway out of sight. Then he closed the door and set about rearranging the disordered furniture in the little room, preparatory to going to sleep again. He was careful to wash up the pool of blood and to remove all other signs of the late conflict from the apartment, and then, throwing himself upon the couch, was soon sleeping as sweetly as if crime and bloodshed were things unknown to him.

And Mat, the blood still oozing from the undressed wound in his head, lay cramped up in the narrow tunnel, wholly unaware of his surroundings and of the exciting scenes through which he had passed.

Blessed unconsciousness!

CHAPTER VIII.

THE FATE OF THE PAYMASTER.

"GUARD your prisoner closely. Don't let him escape under any circumstances."

These were the words of General Earl, addressed to the two officers in whose custody he had paroled the paymaster. And they had promised to obey.

It was nearing the close of the day succeeding the night on which the robbery had occurred. The officers had taken their prisoner

for a walk across the campus, and were returning with him to the Academy dormitory for the purpose of retiring. Every person in the institution was aware of Mason's arrest, and knew that he was charged with stealing the twenty thousand dollars. It was a relief for him, therefore to get out of their sight in the four walls of his room, even though his guards shared it with him.

The paymaster was utterly hopeless. His continued refusals to divulge the purpose of his midnight excursion, the fact that he alone besides the commanding officer was acquainted with the combination of the safe, and all the other facts bearing evidence directly against him, forced into his mind a feeling of utter desperation.

He grew reckless in the friendlessness of his position. It mattered little to him, now that proof of his guilt was so conclusive, whether or not he increased that proof by attempting to escape. He thought that a confinement of any length of time, with the disgrace which his arrest entailed, would drive him mad, and he resolved to break his bonds or his neck in getting away from the Academy. What might follow he neither knew nor cared. It was enough for him to be away from the curious and suspicious glances of the people about him, and to shake off the dread which the presence of his guards produced.

Cost what it might, he would escape!

He reached this determination quite a long time before he was able to attempt to carry it out. The two officers who had him in custody conducted him to a room on the third floor of the Academy building, which was used for the confinement of cadets under arrest whenever there was an overflow from the guard house.

It contained three beds and as many chairs. The door was locked by means of a heavy iron bar, fastened into place with lock and key. The single window, and a very small one, overlooked the river nearly thirty feet from the ground. Escape from it had never been known, and in the present case it was made trebly hazardous because of the two guards and the night sentry, who was placed on duty in the outer hall.

"You are to sleep here," one of the officers announced, designating a bed in the furthest corner of the room and speaking to the prisoner. "We don't expect you to make any effort to escape, but to insure against it one of us will sleep with his bed in front of the door and the other by the window."

"Very well," assented Mason, calmly. "Arrange things to suit yourselves."

And they did.

The two officers had been at West Point too long a time to permit any means for the escape of their prisoner, and thus bring upon themselves the wrath and condemnation of the dreaded faculty. On the other hand, they set to work to make it impossible for Mason to get away, and when they finally retired, one bed blocked the barred door and the other had been drawn before the small window. The latter they concluded to be a useless precaution, for they did not believe that any sane man would attempt to leap from it, and the impossibility of any other means of descent was very apparent.

But neither of the officers appreciated the reckless spirit with which the paymaster was now imbued, and had the height been twice as great, he would in all probability have taken the same course.

It was nearly three o'clock in the morning when he arose from his bed, as wide awake as when he had retired, and stepped with noiseless footsteps across the floor.

Both officers were sleeping soundly.

The prisoner bent over the bed of the guard near the window and silently pulled back the heavy shutter. A dim ray of light from the few stars overhead struggled in and illuminated the little room.

Everything seemed to be in readiness for the paymaster's dangerous venture.

He placed one foot upon the bed and raised himself softly. There was a slight creak, and the sleeper turned in bed. Another step and then Mason reached the window. First one foot and then another was shoved outside, and the prisoner sat upon the ledge, looking down upon the ground beneath him. A moment later he arose to his feet, steadied himself upon his narrow footing, and then—

He leaped far out into the darkness!

The ground seemed to fly up to meet him, and he struck it solidly, feet foremost, and bounded in a perfect somersault straight ahead. A couple of rolls and he landed, very well shaken up,

but not materially injured, several yards from where his feet first met the green sward.

It was a most fortunate escape, and one which, nine times out of ten, would have resulted in serious if not fatal injury to the one who undertook it.

Rising to his feet, Mason ran rapidly toward the river.

He had no concerted plan of action, and now that he had effected his escape from the building, the hopelessness of his position came back upon him in full force. He felt more than inclined to cast himself into the river and forget his troubles in the long sleep, but he threw off the impulse and began looking about him for some means of crossing to the other side. He thought it possible that he could obtain a small boat, even at that time of night, and kept a sharp lookout as he walked along the shore.

Not far from the railroad depot he discovered a skiff drawn up on the sands. A pair of oars lay in it, and the painter was wound carelessly about the stump of a tree near the water's edge. It seemed as if fate had placed it there—directly in the path of the fleeing officer.

Mason stepped into the boat, after loosening the painter, and placed the oars in position. A moment later it was being propelled by his vigorous strokes straight out into the river. It was his purpose to reach Garrison's as quickly as possible, and from there to make his way to New York City, change his clothing, and then leave the country. If his innocence should ever be established he would return, but until that time he thought it best to be judged guilty, rather than to suffer the disgrace of his arrest and court martial.

He had almost reached the opposite shore before he noticed lying at his feet in the bottom of the boat a handsome revolver. He leaned forward, picked it up, and as he did so made another and a more alarming discovery.

Through the foliage on shore he could make out in the dim starlight the form of a man reclining on the bank, with his face turned toward him.

Quick as lightning there flashed through Mason's mind a plan to turn the unexpected meeting to his own account. The man had doubtless discovered him, and would learn the next day of the escape from the Academy. Why not make him believe that the person in the skiff had come to that lonely spot for the purpose of killing himself? It would look very probable in the face of what the paymaster had already done.

And Mason quickly resolved to do it.

Raising the revolver to a level with his forehead, and so near that the report almost deafened him, he pressed the trigger.

The next instant he had plunged overboard!

Mason was an excellent swimmer, and for nearly a minute he swam entirely under water. Rising to the surface at length, he propelled himself with long, vigorous strokes away from the scene of the mock tragedy, not even pausing to see what had become of the man upon the bank.

He did not reach the shore until he had gone down-stream nearly a hundred yards. There he turned in and climbed up the embankment and took a seat upon a fallen tree to recover his breath.

He had been there but a short time when he heard, coming from some point behind him, the sound of voices. His first impulse was to take to the river again, but finding that he could do so safely, he arose and approached the bushes behind him for the purpose of looking through. Not more than ten yards from him, between two cedar trees, two men were engaged in digging a hole in the ground. A lantern sat near by, and, from the light it gave, Mason could see quite clearly all that was going on. He knelt down and pushing the bushes slightly, held his breath as he watched the persons in front of him.

Both wore the uniform of the Academy, and one of them the paymaster recognized, with a start of surprise, as his room-mate, Lieutenant Benton! The other also had on a uniform, and wore a lieutenant's cap, the rest of his apparel belonging to a sergeant's outfit. Benton had on his head a slouch hat, drawn well down over his eyes, and it was clearly apparent that the two had changed head-gear. The uniform which the colored man wore did not fit him, and Mason was quite sure that he did not belong to the Academy troops.

"I thought yo' wa'n't never goin' ter git hyer," the darky said, leaning on his spade for a moment, and wiping the perspiration from his brow with the sleeve of his coat. "Ge-

whittaker! but that bag wuz heftv. I never knew that there was so much weight to gold."

"Hush-sh!" said the lieutenant, also ceasing his labor for a moment. "Don't speak so loud."

The heart of the eavesdropper gave a glad bound.

"Hit come nigh to swampin' de boat," the darky went on, in a lower tone of voice. "Golly, but yo' ought ter see Buck in dem clo'es of mine."

He chuckled at the recollection, and then fell to digging again. They had already excavated a hole two feet deep and half as broad, but the vigor of their exertions seemed to indicate that it was their intention to double those dimensions before they got through.

"You would have thought the gold was heavy," the lieutenant said, "if you had carried it down to the river as I did, after nearly working my fingers off at that blanked combination."

"Dat wa'n't nothin' 'side of de job of carryin' dat young feller we caught to-night ober to my cabin. L r' A'mighty, but he war heftv."

"You didn't untie him, did you?"

"I reckon not. Jest opened de do' an' chucked him in. Even if he can git de cords off'n him, he kyan't open de do'. An' even if he do dat, dar's Bunch—hull chaw him all up quicker'n nothin' at all ef he gets out."

"Then he'll be safe enough, I guess," the lieutenant said. "Get to work now, Sam, for we'll have to finish this job pretty soon so that I can get back to the Academy."

"Dat's whut I'm a-doin'," the darky said, making the earth fly. "Ef you'd hustle a leetle yo'self, mebbe we'd pit done quicker."

Benton took the hint and fell to work in good earnest, and in less than fifteen minutes the hole in the ground had grown considerably.

"Don't throw the earth so far away," the lieutenant advised. "We'll have to cover this all over after we get the stuff buried, and unless we can hide the signs of digging here, some one may stumble upon the thing, and then the game will be up."

"Dar hain't no danger of dat," the colored man said. "No one don't nebber come here except by way of de ribber, and dey hain't no call to do dat. I wouldn't 'a' choosed dis place, if I hadn't knowed hit was so private dat no one sca'sely eber cums roun' yere."

"I'm glad of that. Now, then, Sam, get the bag and we'll dump it in."

"All right, sah. I dropped it behind dis bush hyer when I heard you comin', beca'se I didn't know fo' shuah dat hit wuz you; see?"

"Yes," replied Benton. "Do you think we'd better bury bag and all, or just the bare gold?"

"Best put in de bag. Hit's easy to carry dat way when yo' dig hit up, 'less'n yo' wait till de bag rots."

"Which we most decidedly won't do. Bring it here now and pass it as far down as you can, while I throw on the dirt."

The darky threw down his spade and walked a few paces toward the river. He leaned over a short row of bushes and began to fumble about with his hands in the darkness. He uttered an exclamation of impatience and then walked around in front to continue his search.

A moment passed and then he arose and called to the lieutenant in a voice expressing both astonishment and alarm:

"Brung de light hyer, quick! I kyan't fin' de bag!"

Benton sprang toward the lantern, seized it and hurried to the colored man's side.

"What's that?" he demanded. "You can't find the bag?"

"Dat's de way hit seems," the darky responded in a shaky voice. "I done put hit right down dar, whar de grass is pressed into de mud. Hit's been took off, an'—"

The lieutenant interrupted him. Holding the lantern close to the ground, he cried in a low, but startled voice:

"Here are footprints!"

"Yo' right. Dey's jest made too. Some one's done sneaked up an' swiped de bag."

Benton's face paled and the kinks began to straighten out of Sam's curly wool.

"Le's run!" he gasped.

"Hold up!" commanded the lieutenant. "Come with me to my boat and we'll see if any of the Academy boys have done this. Put a bold front on the matter and see what comes of it."

"Yessir," said the colored man, making a visible effort at bracing up.

"Act just as if nothing had occurred—never

mind the hole. Don't say a word to Buck or Harry about this and perhaps we can escape yet."

The two hurried further down-stream to where Benton's skiff was moored and presently the men, angry, astonished and thoroughly frightened, were making the little boat fairly fly toward the West Point shore.

"Keep a stiff upper lip," were the last words of the lieutenant. "Don't let a living soul know what's happened to-night and we may pull through."

"I won't," replied the darky, and then the two parted, Benton hurrying back to his room and Sam starting up the river in the direction of his cabin.

Both were too much disconcerted by the loss of the gold to care anything about each other. Each was anxious to make himself proof against the suspicion which they now expected would rise against them on the morrow.

CHAPTER IX.

AN UNEXPECTED MEETING.

THE first reference which the two men made to the bag of gold convinced the paymaster that they spoke of the twenty thousand dollars which had been stolen from his safe in the Academy. He listened to them until Sam said that he had placed the bag behind the bush, and designated the place where Mason lay.

The latter reached out his arm and encountered the bag not two feet from him!

Almost instantly a plan for outwitting the two men flashed through his mind. Grasping the bag firmly he lifted it and hurried silently away. It was fully as heavy as Sam had stated, and Mason did not go far before appreciating the fact. But he was too glad to get the gold back to think of dropping it on that account.

Pretty soon a rock along the shore blocked his path, and he waded out into the river and continued his progress with the bag poised on his shoulder. His only purpose was to place as much distance as possible between himself and the two men before they discovered their loss.

And this he did.

It was too dark for him to see anything about him, and he was in constant danger of tripping over hidden stones in the water, but by walking carefully he managed to make the trip successfully.

Reaching the shore again, he hurried on for some distance above the landing toward the little village. He was searching for some place that would serve as a temporary hiding-place for the gold, and it did not take him long to find one.

In the end of a hollow trunk of a tree lying back from the river he placed the bag, covering the aperture with grass and dirt to hide it from observation. Then he went down to the river-bank, stripped off his clothing, and rolled it up in a bundle. This, by means of his suspenders, he fastened to his shoulders, and then waded out into the water. As stated, he was an excellent swimmer, and had frequently made the trip between the two shores. So he did not hesitate about striking out vigorously for the opposite side of the river, not desiring to wait until morning for a boat to row across.

The river is not very wide at this point, and he reached the West Point shore quite a ways above the landing. The tide was floating in and had carried him quite a distance farther up-stream than he had desired to go.

He climbed up on the bank and dressed himself again. He had scarcely finished this operation before he heard footsteps approaching him from the south. Some one was walking along the railroad track. It was too dark for him to see who it was until the person drew nearer. Then he recognized the colored man whom he had left on the other side of the river with Lieutenant Benton! He had changed his clothing since, however, and now wore a suit of rough homespun in place of the natty sergeant's uniform.

He was hurrying rapidly along, and halted not far from where Mason stood. After a moment's hesitation, he turned and began climbing up the rocky embankment on his left. Reaching a place at which a shelving rock jutted out, he grasped it with his hands and slid out of sight within.

The paymaster marveled greatly at this strange action on the part of the colored man, and after waiting for a few minutes, he started up the embankment to investigate. He discovered the fissure between the rocks, and at once lowered himself inside. The tunnel in front partially accounted for the darky's disappearance, and the paymaster began to crawl forward on all-fours. He increased his pace at the

sound of voices ahead of him, and, reaching a point near the open trap-door, halted and listened intently.

"Go 'way, chile! you kyan't fool me," Sam was saying. "I knows yo' is a gurl. What fer you go trampin' aroun' in boys' clo'es, eh?"

There was no reply.

"Come, now, no one 'll bu't yo' ef you tell the truth. What wuz yo' doin' thar dressed up like this?"

"Before I answer any of your questions, sir, I would like to know who you are and why you have brought me here?"

The sound of the speaker's voice caused the paymaster a start of the most intense astonishment.

"My name," said the colored man, coolly, "is Sam Watkins. I brung yo' hyer 'kase why I thought yo' wuz some one else. Leastwise, fer ail I know, yo' may be de right purson arfter all. Hit all depends upon de account yo' giv' of yo'self."

"And if I don't choose to give any account of myself at all—what then?"

"Den yo' mus' stay hyer."

"In this cabin?"

"Yes."

"As your prisoner?"

"Ob course."

"For how long?"

"Mebbe a month—mebbe less."

"But I hav'n't done anything to you that you should treat me like this."

"Perhaps yo' hain't—I dunno."

"And you refuse to unbind me under any circumstances?"

"No, I didn't say dat. I'll untie yo' presently, but fustly I want know who yo' be and why-fer yo' go paradin' 'roun' yer' in dem clo'es."

"If I tell you truthfully, will you let me go?"

"I reckon."

"And won't tell any one that I have been confined here?"

"I hain't likely to do that."

"Well, then, I'll tell you."

"Kerrect."

"I was going up to the Academy to meet some one."

"What fur?"

"I had an important message to deliver."

"Yes."

"I went at night so that I could pass for a man more easily."

"Then you really are a gurl?"

"You said I was."

"And so did you—go on!"

"I had excellent reasons for meeting him disguised like this."

"Ob course. I see all dat."

"I had left the railroad station from the ten-thirty train out of New York, and was going up the hill to the Academy building when you and the three cadets pounced upon me."

"How'd yo' know they wuz cadets?"

"I saw their uniforms."

"All right."

"You brought me here and here I have been since."

"So I see."

"And that is all I've got to say."

"But it hain't all I've got to say. Now listen."

"I am doing so."

"You came up in de ten-thirty train from New York?"

"Yes."

"An' went up to the Academy to see Gen'l Earl?"

"Yes."

"About de robbery dat was committed dar last night?"

The prisoner hesitated a moment, and then said:

"Yes."

"I t'ought so. You air jest the pusson we wanted."

"I am!"

"Yessir."

"But why?"

"Dat I kyan't tole yo' jest now. Say!"

"Well?"

"How long hab you been on de Secret Service force?"

"What is that?"

"I asked yo' how long since yo' had taken up de profesh of—de detective business, I mean?"

"I don't know what you are talking about."

"You don't, eh? Mebbe you mean to tole me dat you hain't one of dem Secret Service men?"

"I said before that I wasn't a man."

"A woman, den?"

"I don't know anything about the Secret Service!"

The darky laughed incredulously.

"An' yo' hain't a detective?"

"Of course not."

Another laugh.

"Yo' jest said yo' wuz."

"I did not."

"Well, yo' giv' me to understan' dat, anyway."

"How so?"

"Yo' said dat yo' had cum up from de city becase the gin'ul had sent fur yo' wid a telegram."

"I said no such thing."

"Didn't be telegraph fo' yo'?"

"No."

"Yo' come up of yo' own accord."

"Yes."

"An' was goin' to see do gin'ul unbeknown to him?"

"Yes."

"An' about de burglary?"

"I said so."

"Dat's mighty queer."

"Why so?"

"Nebber min' why so. I don't believe yo'se tellin' de truth."

"I am."

"Den tell me what you was a-goin' to tell Gin'ul Earl, will yo'?"

"I can't do that."

"Why?"

"Because it's something that doesn't concern you."

"I say it do."

"Then you know something about the stolen money, do you?"

The man answered pretty sharply this time:

"No, I don't!"

"Then why are you so anxious to have me make known my business with General Earl?"

"Beka'se den I kin tell whether or no yo' is de pusson we wanted."

"And if I tell you, will you keep your promise and release me afterward?"

"Dat's accordin'."

"According to what?"

"Whether or no yo' is de man—"

"I'm not a man."

"Or de gurl which we want."

"I'm sure that I'm not the one, for I knew nothing about any Secret Service affair."

"Dat may all be. Tole me now what fo' yo' want see de giner'!"

"I will, but first, I wish you would untie me and allow me to sit down on one of those chairs."

The colored man evidently complied with this request, for he arose and moved across the floor, and presently two pair of feet were moving about over Mason's head.

The paymaster was more than surprised at hearing the conversation which had ensued between the darky and his prisoner. He had recognized in the latter no less a personage than Carrie Wintthrop, and had he not believed it to be certain death to do so, he would have tried to climb up through the trap-door for the purpose of effecting her rescue.

As it was, he held himself in readiness for making the assault in case of an emergency.

"Now then," said Sam, "go on with yo'se story. No funny bizness, my gurl, or I'll let fly with this leetle gun hyer."

"I don't know why you should shoot me, for I have told you nothing but the truth."

"I dunno 'bout that."

"But I do. What have I to gain by lying?"

"A good deal. But go on now, an' min' what I tole yo'."

"I certainly shall. As I have already said, I was going to see the general about the robbery that was committed last night in the Academy."

"Yes."

"For which the paymaster has been arrested."

"Yes."

"I received word that he was thought guilty because he was unable to account for his absence from this room the night the gold was stolen."

"Dat's right."

"And so I came to tell the commanding officer that the paymaster was innocent."

The darky uttered a low whistle.

"You did, eh?" he said. "What do yo' know about de thing, anyway?"

"I know he did not commit the robbery, because he was with me when the gold was taken."

"And that is whut yo' wuz a-goin' ter tell de giner'!"

"Yes."

"You didn't want him to know that you was a girl?"

"No; but I wish now that I had. Then this thing wouldn't have occurred."

"I reckon it wouldn't, but then it's jest as well as it is."

"Then you will let me go, now?"

"No."

"You said you would."

"I've changed my mind since."

"Why?"

"Bek'ase I find that it'll be necessary to keep yo' hyer fer a spell."

"Then I am the person you intended to capture?"

"No, not presackly; but it's just as important that we should have you."

"I know now that you are in some way connected with the stealing of the gold. You are keeping me away from the Academy, so that an innocent man will suffer for the crime."

"You've struck it this time."

"If you—"

The colored man interrupted her.

"I've learned all I want to," he said. "Take your sachel now, an' git in that room thar. Don't come out of it until I tell you to. You won't be hurt if you behave yourself, an' don't try to escape. Thar's a big dog outside that'll chew yo' all up ef he gits the chance. Good-night!"

The girl went into the inner room without returning the salutation, and the colored man prepared to retire for the night, first closing the trap-door! As a matter of extra precaution against the escape of his prisoner, he dragged the bed over it and slept there.

This accounts for the trouble Mason went to to raise the trap-door when he became convinced that the darky was asleep. And futile efforts, too, for his greatest exertions did not serve to move the heavy mass upon it in the slightest. Seeing how impossible it was for him to force an entrance in this way, the paymaster crawled backward out of the tunnel, and sought to find the outer part of the cabin in the woods.

In this also he failed.

CHAPTER X.

ANOTHER UNEXPECTED MEETING.

To the paymaster all was now clear regarding the presence of Carrie Winthrop as prisoner in the colored man's cabin. Her explanation as to that fully satisfied him, but he could not imagine why it was that she had come to be captured by him. He paid but little attention to this matter, however, recognizing as he did the necessity of effecting her rescue as soon as possible.

It was nearly morning when he finally desisted from his search after Sam's cabin. He was not yet ready to make known his whereabouts to the Academy officials, for he was desirous of clearing up everything connected with the robbery before doing so. He knew also that, unless he alone could release Carrie from the cabin, the matter of her capture and all the rest would have to be made public. For these reasons he determined to keep away from the Academy yet awhile, and walked for some distance further back in the woods. Reaching a deserted spot half a mile or more back from the river, he stretched himself out on a bed of pine needles beneath the branches of a large tree, and presently fell asleep. His many exertions during the day and night just passed had greatly tired him, and the hours fled rapidly while he lay there. The sun had mounted in the heavens and the morning passed away before his eyes opened, and it was noon when he awoke.

A glance at his watch showed him what time it was, and then a vacancy beneath his trousers belt warned him that it was long past his breakfast hour.

It would not be safe for him to venture toward the river, for he knew that by this time searching parties would have been sent out from the Academy after him, unless the man whom he had seen upon the bank had already announced his suicide. A mile or more further inland dwelt a man known by the cadets as "Pancake Pete," who had long made his living by supplying runaway parties of students with provisions. Mason knew that he could be trusted, and at once set out for his cabin. It was a half-hour's walk, and he reached it just as Pete was sitting down to dinner. He was surprised to see the paymaster, but he asked no questions, and the two were soon engaged in getting outside of a large plate of fried ham and eggs—one of Pete's "special" dishes.

Mason took both dinner and supper at the cabin, preferring not to venture away again

until after dark, and at night set out for the river, armed with one of Pete's trusty six-shooters.

He was resolved this time to burst open the trap-door at the end of the underground passageway if it was in the power of a 32-caliber bullet to do so. He could not find the cabin before in the darkness, and this time he did not pause to look for it. The tunnel was a surer and safer mode of entrance, and this he decided to take.

Reaching the railroad after his walk through the woods, the paymaster had no difficulty in finding the hidden entrance to the colored man's cabin. It did not take him long to get into it, but before he had proceeded a dozen yards, a startling thing occurred.

An arm and hand, with a grip of iron, shot out from the darkness in front of him and clasped his throat.

The suddenness and violence of the attack completely paralyzed him, and before he had recovered from the shock, a pair of handcuffs had been fastened to his wrists. The next moment he was left alone, while his unknown assailant moved away toward the cabin.

Then came the voices of the two departing cadets, their recall by the darky, the venture of the detective, the struggle with its unfortunate ending, and the closing of the trap-door after Mat's unconscious body had been thrown down into the tunnel. All this is already familiar to the reader, but Mason knew naught of its meaning as he lay cramped up and confined in his narrow quarters.

The time passed slowly as he lay there, occasionally shifting his position to ease to a limited extent his aching limbs. He had to depend entirely on his ears to convey to him what was passing in the cabin, and the sounds were so vague and confused as to be meaningless when they reached him.

But some time after the trap-door had been closed for the last time, he heard a sound which he could not mistake.

It was a groan.

Listening carefully, he heard it again—a moan of pain coming from the direction of the cabin. It sounded hollow and ghostly in the confines of the close tunnel, and for some minutes the paymaster kept perfectly still, almost holding his breath.

Then, realizing that some one was suffering, possibly within reach of his aid, he began to struggle forward. It was wholly impossible for him to move in the opposite direction, and he made but slow and painful progress, his hands being confined by the steel bracelets. He was acting the good Samaritan under decidedly adverse circumstances, but he kept steadily at it and arrived at length near to the sufferer.

"Hello!" he said, guardedly. "What's the matter?"

A groan was the only answer, and he moved further on.

"Are you badly hurt?" he asked, now by the side of the prostrate man.

"No—not very—my head—untie these cords!"

The sufferer jerked out the words without moving.

"I can't," the paymaster answered, in a whisper. "My hands also are fastened."

"Are you—the man—that I handcuffed—awhile ago?" asked the detective, hoarsely.

The reader has already, in all probability, guessed the identity of the prisoner, and knows how he came in the awkward position.

"Yes," replied Mason.

"And are you one of the cadets that are in league with this colored man?"

"I am not."

The answer was so emphatic as to be unmistakable.

"Then what are you doing in this tunnel?"

"I'm here now because I can't get out."

"But why did you come here?"

"Because I saw the darky, Sam, enter, and I had reasons for suspecting him of having done something wrong. I followed him, to investigate."

"That's just what brought me here, and we appear to be in the same boat. I handcuffed you back here because I thought you were one of those cadets who stand in with the colored man."

"And I thought the same of you."

"Well, then, if you can reach into my vest-pocket—the one on the right-hand side—you will find a key that will unlock those bracelets. That's it."

The paymaster managed to get the key after some little difficulty, and then Mat said:

"Hold one end of it between your teeth and then raise your hands until you find the key-hole. Turn your hands when you do, and the thing will unlock."

Mason followed these directions, and the bracelets dropped from his wrists.

"Thank Heaven!" he said, fervently. "It's the first, and I hope the last time that I have occasion to wear these things. Now, if you'll turn over, I'll soon cut the cords that bind your hands. That will do."

A moment later both men were free again.

"Now, then," Mat said, "before we go any further, let's exchange experiences. My name is Murray, and I'm a detective from the New York Secret Service Bureau, detailed by General Earl to work up the case of the stolen gold from the Academy."

"And I am the paymaster, Mason, who is suspected of having committed the robbery."

"Who escaped last night from the guards?"

"Yes."

"Oh! Then you didn't shoot yourself over near the east shore about three o'clock in the morning?"

"No."

"I thought perhaps it was you. I saw the thing from the bank, but haven't said anything about it since."

"It was you, then, who was watching me from the shore?"

"Watching you?"

"Yes."

"I thought you said that it wasn't you in the boat?"

"No; I said that I wasn't the person who had committed suicide."

"I know that."

"But it was I who tried to make you believe that I had. It was a trick of mine to throw the officers from my track."

"Then you had cause for getting away from the officers, eh?"

"I did then—I haven't now."

"Why not?"

"Because I have found the gold that was stolen."

"Found the gold?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"Last night."

"Where?"

"Across the river. After I left the boat I swam down quite a ways, and when I landed, I heard voices. Looking through the bushes, I saw two men engaged in digging a hole in the ground. Behind the bush, near where I lay, I found a bag containing the gold, which they intended to bury."

"And the two men were—"

"This colored man above us, and an officer from the Academy."

"Lieutenant Benton?"

"Yes."

"You took the bag of gold?"

"Yes."

"What did you do with it?"

"I hid it further up the river, in a place where I could get it at any time."

"And then came directly across to this side of the river?"

"I swam over."

"I see. Perhaps you don't know that you're interested in a prisoner which the darky is keeping confined overhead?"

"I overheard a conversation last night that apprised me of the fact. That is why I am here now."

"You have come to rescue the young lady?"

"Yes."

"Then I'll help you to do it, gladly, although she is responsible for my present condition. But first I'd like to know how it is that she came here."

"I don't know very well, myself."

"Neither do I. As far as I can learn, she was captured by mistake for me."

"For you?"

"Exactly."

"But how?"

"General Earl, you see, wired down to New York City for a detective night before last."

"Yes."

"If he got the telegram in time, he could catch the last train from the city which stops at West Point."

"The one Carrie came up on."

"Yes. She took that one, and was the only passenger that left it at this station. In some way these scoundrelly cadets and the darky learned of the general's having sent for a detective, and made up their minds to kidnap him upon his arrival."

"I see."

"The chief of the Secret Service Bureau didn't notify me of the case until it was too late to catch the last train on the West Shore road. I took one on the other side, however, and got to Garrison's some hours later."

"And that is how you happened to be lying on the bank when I rowed across?"

"Yes."

"You think that Carrie, because she was dressed in men's clothing, was taken for the detective whom the general had sent for?"

"I feel sure of it."

"And that they captured her and placed her in this cabin for that reason?"

"Yes."

"It does look that way."

"I think so, too. Now then, if you are ready, we'll see what we can do for Mr. Watkins."

"Are you willing to make the venture now?"

"At once."

"That will suit me. Shall we try to find the upper part of the cabin in the woods, or make an attempt to force an entrance here?"

"I think we'd better get in this way if possible."

"All right."

"But first I'd like to ask you one question."

"Fire ahead."

"Do you know who took the gold from the safe?"

"No."

"Lieutenant Benton and this darky, of course, were implicated in it."

"It looks that way."

"So I think, and I guess we will be able to make out a clear case against them."

"We ought to, now that we have recovered the money."

"Then come on. Get out your shooter and we'll go up together. The man won't stand much chance against both of us, I reckon, and the girl won't trouble us again."

"I'm with you. It will require our combined strength to force open the trap-door, for the man sleeps on it."

"He does, eh? Then we'll give him to understand that an earthquake has broken loose beneath him. Both of us will get our shoulders against the door—that's it. Now—all together—let her go!"

All the strength in the frames of the two men were put forth, and the trap-door shot upward, carrying the bed and its occupant with it. The latter was sent flying half-way across the room and struck the floor with a crash, while the bed fell close beside him.

If Sam thought of the violent eruption in the light of an earthquake, he must have classed it with the worst possible variety, for in all his experiences he had never been awakened with such force and thoroughness.

CHAPTER XI.

CAPTURE AND ESCAPE.

MAT and the paymaster heard the crash which followed their sudden uplifting of the trap-door, and then both climbed into the darkness above them together. Mason held his revolver ready for instant use, and his companion did likewise.

For a moment they stood upon the cabin floor, after the sounds had died away, and listened. Evidently the colored man was too frightened for the moment to move or to make any noise that would designate his whereabouts, and a deep silence filled the little room. Then he arose.

The instant the two men heard him get up, they sprang forward.

A short, sharp struggle followed, and Sam was thrown down, his arms held behind him for an instant, and then the steel bracelets encircled his wrists. He was too much frightened by the suddenness of the assault to make any sort of a resistance; but even if he had, it would have been of no avail. The two men were thoroughly in earnest, and would have brought him to time with a bullet, had that been necessary.

"Go in and find the girl," said the detective.

"I'll strike a light and try to find the lamp."

"All right. I know where she is."

Mason disappeared within the inner room, and presently appeared with the cause of Mat's downfall—the figure robed in white.

"I'm very sorry that I made the wretched blunder," the girl began, advancing toward the detective. "I took you to be one of the cadets who were trying to force an entrance into my room."

"I forgive you," Mat said. "And now that we have laid out the darky what do you propose to do?"

"I have my clothing in a sachel in the room," the girl said, "and if you'll wait a moment I shall be ready to go with you."

She was clad in a long gown of some white stuff, which she at once changed, reappearing in a dress of dark material a few moments later.

"The men's clothing, which I wore here, I shall leave," she said, with a shudder. "Thank Heaven, I shall never have cause to put them on again."

"I hope not," Mason said, fervently. "They certainly have caused you a good deal of unpleasantness. Are we ready to leave now?"

"I guess so," Mat replied. "I've put a pair of bracelets on this fellow's feet, and he can't possibly get away. We'll settle the dog as we go out. I hear him howling now."

"You intend to leave Sam here, then?"

"Yes."

"For how long?"

"I shall come or send back after him pretty soon."

"And in the mean time you are going back to the Academy?"

"Yes; I want to report to General Earl, and then I think you two had better see him together. At this time you can hold an interview with him without any one's knowing it."

"Then I shall go home," the girl said. "The darky promised to release me to-morrow, so that I could return to the city under conditions that I spoke to no one of the capture. I readily promised, and he telegraphed to my uncle not to be alarmed because of my absence."

The three started toward the door, Mat walking in advance, with his revolver clasped in his right hand. On the outside the dog could be heard growling and leaping up against the side of the cabin.

"Stand back a little ways," said the detective, throwing back the bolt of the door and grasping the knob. "If I should miss him on the first shot, he might get in and hurt some one."

Mason and the girl retreated a few paces, the former holding his revolver ready for use in case Mat's failed him.

Then the detective opened the door! There came a growl, a rush, two ringing reports and a howl of anguish.

The beast fell forward across the threshold of the little cabin, with two bullet-holes in his forehead—dead.

"Come on," said the detective, coolly, throwing open the chamber of his revolver to dislodge the empty shells.

"He's as harmless as his master now!"

The three stepped over the lifeless body, out into the cool night air. Mat shoved the carcass outside with his foot, and then closed the door.

"I hope none of the guards are awake," he said, as they started on a brisk walk toward the Academy. "It would be best if you two could see the general alone."

"We can, I think," replied the paymaster. "I know the ins and outs of the concern well enough to manage that."

"Very well, then, arrange it to suit yourselves. There's a train leaves for the city some time near one o'clock. Perhaps Miss Wintrop can catch that."

"I guess she can. Our interview with the general won't be long, for we only—"

"Hush!"

The warning cry was uttered by the detective.

Reaching out his arm he brought his two companions to a halt, and with the other pointed off to the right of where they stood.

"See!" he said, in a low voice. "There go three men in uniform, with something in their hands."

The others looked, and were able to discern in the darkness the figures of three men moving toward the river, at an angle from the road. Each one carried something in his hand.

"Go on to the Academy," Mat said. "I want to investigate this matter."

"Are you going to follow those fellows?"

"Yes."

"But I—"

"No 'buts' about it. You can get along very well with General Earl without me, and I want to see what is going on here. Make as little noise as possible."

"All right—we're off."

"Good-by; I'll see you at the Academy soon."

Mason and the girl passed on down the road, leaving the detective standing with his eyes on the three dark figures moving toward him through the woods. It was too dark for him to see with any degree of clearness who the men were or what it was they carried.

On they came, until, reaching the road, they struck out in the direction of Sam's cabin on a rapid walk.

Mat followed them.

They were evidently in a great hurry, for at times they would break into a dog-trot and speed along until their wind gave out. Then they would slow up again and mop the dripping perspiration from their faces as they hurried along.

The detective's surmise that Sam's cabin formed their destination proved to be correct. They did not stop once until they reached it and then one of them knocked vigorously on the door while the others set down their bundles and gathered about him.

"Come in!"

The hoarse voice of the colored man sounded from within.

The man who had knocked turned the knob and pushed open the door. He entered, followed by his companions, and all of them stumbled upon the corpse of the dog. Then their eyes encountered the figure of the colored man lying prone upon the floor, with the handcuffs on his hands and feet.

The detective had crossed over to a point opposite the open doorway of the cabin and at no great distance from it. He could see and hear all that went on within, and when the light flashed into the faces of the cadets he recognized the foremost as Lieutenant Benton and the others as Buck Larmount and the man who had accompanied him to the cabin some time before—Harry Zelda.

It was the lieutenant who spoke first.

"Great God!" he exclaimed, looking from the blood-bespattered floor to the prostrate master of the dead brute. "What has happened here?"

A groan preceded the reply.

"The game is up," said Sam, moving so as to see who his visitors were. "Whar be you a-goin'?"

The bundles which the cadets carried showed that they were fleeing from the Academy. Benton and Zelda wore heavy satchels swung about their shoulders.

"We're lighting out," said the lieutenant hurriedly, casting an uneasy glance about him. "And we came to see if you were with us."

"Wid yo? Dis don't look like hit, I reckon!"

"But what's the matter with you? Who shot the dog? How did you get those handcuffs on you?"

Another groan of anguish from the man on the floor came before the words.

"Two men done cum hyer jist a few minutes ergo an' put de bracelets on me. Den dey take off de gurl, an' dey shoot de dorg, an' dey—"

"Girl—what girl?"

"De gurl I kep' hyer."

"Kept where?"

"In de cabin. De one we took for a man."

"Took for a man! Are you crazy, Sam?"

"Nope; I—but you don't know anything about it."

"I guess you're right. But where are the fellows that did all this?"

"Dey is gone."

"Gone where?"

"I dunno."

"After a wagon or something to cart you away in?"

Another groan.

"I s'pect so."

"Then the whole game is up."

"Yes."

"And we skipped just in time. We've got a steam launch down here by the upper dock, and we intend to go down the river in her. We expected to take you with us, but now—"

Again did the lieutenant glance restlessly about him.

"Kyan't yo' take me erlong as it is?" asked the colored man, raising himself on one elbow.

Benton shook his head.

"How could we? We can't carry you."

"Kyan't yo' break dese chains?"

"I should think not. Those things will have to stay where they are until their key unlocks them."

Sam fell back again.

"Yo'r' a-goin' back on me," he said.

"Yo'r—"

"We're doing nothing of the kind," interrupted Larmount. "But you don't suppose that we are going to wait here and be taken along with you—do you? I guess not. Come, boys, grab your things and we will hurry down to the dock. Luke will have steam up by this time."

The three started for the door.

"Come back!" wailed Sam, half rising when he saw that they were leaving him. "Come back, I say. Yo'r' a-goin' back on Sam—come back—come—"

And then their footsteps died away as they

hurried off through the woods toward the river.

Mat followed closely after them, knowing that it was beyond the power of the darky to escape. The three cadets moved forward on a brisk walk for nearly a mile. At this point there is a place called the "Upper Dock." Here are several brick-yards, and a pier runs for a considerable distance out into the river. It is a favorite landing and stopping-place for the tugs which ply back and forth between New York and the brick-yards for the purpose of towing barge-loads of the stuff to the city.

The three fugitives hurried down the embankment to the railroad track and then started on a run for the pier.

The detective kept at no great distance behind them.

Reaching the shore end of the dock, they turned and ran out toward the end of it. Here two steam tugs lay. One had evidently been awaiting the arrival of the cadets for some time, for it had steam up and was all ready to put out into the river. The other had just come in and was making fast to the pier.

"Petrel ahoy!" shouted Benton, as the three rushed up.

"On shore!" came the answering hail from the pilot-house.

"Is that you, Luke?"

"Yes. Are you the boys that want to hire the boat?"

"Yes."

"Then tumble aboard. Cast off the ropes there, Mike. All right—start her off!"

Mat reached the end of the pier just as the vessel swung out into the stream. For a moment he was nonplused. It seemed as though the cadets would escape after all.

Then, turning, he leaped on board the boat which was making fast. Glancing up at the pilot-house, he hailed the captain.

"Can I hire this tug for the night?"

"Ay, ay!" replied the commander. "A week if you want."

"Then throw off the ropes and put in chase of that boat that just left here."

"The Petrel—the one with the red light shining through the cabin window?"

"Yes. Overhaul her, and I'll pay you double wages for the time it takes."

"We can do it. That ain't nothing floats on this stream that can distance the Vivian. Dick!"

"Ay, ay!"

"Cast off the ropes and make ready—Jack!"

The latter name he called into the speaking-tube connecting with the engine-room.

"Ay, ay!"

"Put on all the steam you've got."

"Ay, ay!"

An instant later the Vivian swung loose, and then went rushing out into the river in full pursuit of the Petrel and the three fugitives she held on board. It was so dark that the captain, looking out of the pilot-house window, could only see the bright red light on the stern of the vessel he was chasing. If that should be put out the Petrel could easily escape.

CHAPTER XII.

A STERN CHASE.

THE steady splash of the flying screw alone broke the stillness of the midnight air as the Vivian rushed along. A hundred yards ahead glimmered the red stern-light of the Petrel, and the bow of the pursuing craft was kept in line with that with unswerving skill. The captain's hands never left the wheel nor his eyes the guiding star before him. As he leaned forward out of the pilot-house window for the second time Mat, who was standing near the bow, turned to speak to him.

"Captain!"

"Ay, ay!"

"Are we gaining on her?"

"I can't tell now. I'm sure we ain't losing any."

"Have you got all steam on?"

"Every bit of it."

The detective paced back and forth across the forward deck with restless energy.

"Don't lose sight of her," he said, "and get along as fast as you can without bursting the boiler."

"Ay, ay," answered the captain. "That's what we're doing now."

The little tug was rushing along at a terrific rate for a boat of its size and character, and her screw threw up a wide wake behind them, while the piston-rod in the engine-room shook the craft from stem to stern with every throb.

It was evident that the Vivian was doing her level best to overhaul the Petrel.

The latter vessel could not be seen at all in the darkness, but the position of her stern light showed her progress through the water. As far as Mat could judge the two steamers were moving at about the same rate of speed.

The detective found that, besides himself, there were on board the Vivian four persons—Captain Bud Rennells, Dick Halpin, the deck-hand, Jack Banks, the engineer, and Josh Phillips, the colored cook. He anticipated trouble in the ensuing meeting with the students and the men on board the Petrel, and knew that it would be necessary to obtain aid if he wished to effect their capture. For that purpose he explained to those on board the reason for his pursuing the Petrel. Captain Rennells and his crew said that they were in his hands, and that fighting was part of the contract in the charter of the Vivian.

"Jist let us know when you want us to sail in," the captain said, "an' ef we don't clear the deck of that boat ahead my name ain't Bud Rennells."

Dick expressed a similar opinion, while Josh was thoughtful enough to bring out of the cabin a half-dozen stout clubs.

"We got them," he said as he leaned the weapons up against the side of the cabin, "to lay out de river piruts with. I reckon dey'll do fer dis job, eh?"

Matsaid they would, and then they turned their eyes again toward the red light glimmering in the darkness far ahead.

An hour passed.

Both steamers held their relative positions, perhaps a little nearer than at the commencement of the pursuit. The Petrel crowded on all steam, not for the purpose of eluding the Vivian, but to get away from West Point as quickly as possible. The people on board of her had no means of knowing, as yet, that they were being pursued.

The river widened as they proceeded, and as numerous other lights became visible, it was with great difficulty that Captain Rennells was able to follow that which came from the stern window of the Petrel.

Another hour went by.

The tugs were still about the same distance apart as when they had started from the West Point dock. The pursuing craft might have made a slight gain, but it was not appreciable in the darkness. Already the eastern sky began to pale with the approach of day, and as the moments flew by the rays of the rising sun began to shoot up behind the Palisades. The detective had kept his position on the forward deck since the start, occasionally exchanging a few words with Dick or Josh. Captain Rennells did not leave the pilot-house nor Jack the engine room even for a moment, the former being able to consult with the latter through the speaking-tube whenever it was desirable.

"Captain," said the detective, turning toward the Vivian's commander, "do you suppose that when day breaks and those fellows discover that we are chasing them, they will be able to put on more steam and escape us altogether?"

"No," replied Captain Rennells, with emphasis, "I don't!"

"Can the Vivian make as fast time as the Petrel?"

"Yes."

"But she don't seem to gain any."

"She don't gain very much now, because them fellers air jist bu'stin' their boiler to make speed. Jest as soon as it's daylight we kin stop that tug, even if we can't ketch it."

"How?"

"I'll show you in a minute. Josh!"

"Yes, sah."

"You know where the rifle hangs over the table in the cabin?"

"Yes, sah."

"Go git it."

The colored cook disappeared down the companionway, and the captain continued:

"I've sent him after a forty-four caliber repeating rifle. It will shoot clear across the river here, and if you're a purty good shot, there ain't no reason why you shouldn't make them fellers ahead shut off steam an' cum about."

"I don't see how it can be done," Mat said, "unless they show themselves above deck, and that they won't do after the first shot."

"Of course they won't. But you see whar the pilot-house is built on sech a boat as this!"

"Yes."

"It's raised clear of the cabin, you see, with windows on all four sides."

"Yes."

"The pilot of that craft ahead is most probably the captain, an' he dassent leave the wheel even fer a minute. If he did, the thing would

go smashing around, and like's not run into something."

"I understand," Mat said.

"Now, if you take that rifle of mine an' send a few shots into that pilot-house close to the ears of the captain, I reckon he won't stay there very long. You needn't shoot him—jest give him the idea that you're tryin' to, an' ef he don't skedaddle quicker'n I can say Jack Robinson, I'll eat the gun."

Mat whistled.

"That's an excellent idea," he said. "Without a man at the wheel, you say we can quickly overtake the Petrel?"

"Yes; she won't keep her headway then, and will flop around with the tide. They may have to shut off steam."

Josh appeared with the rifle and handed it to the detective. Mat inspected it and found that it was already loaded for fifteen shots and in good working order. He brought back the hammer, threw himself down upon the deck and rested the barrel across the railing. He was a first-class shot, and had not the slightest doubt of his ability to make it warm in the vicinity of the Petrel's pilot-house. A dozen bullets sent whizzing about the ears of the pilot ought to make him retreat without the loss of a second in delay. If they did not, Mat was prepared to send the leaden balls into a nearer and more effective spot. The steamer must be brought to a halt whether or not her commander had to be sacrificed in the operation.

As it grew lighter, the Petrel could be seen ahead of them, and then the red light was extinguished. The men on board of her were evidently puzzled as to the purpose of the Vivian in following in their wake, and when it became light enough to distinguish clearly the position of the two steamers, they must have realized that they were being pursued.

The tugs had reached a point below Yonkers by this time, and half a dozen sailing craft were visible about them. Mat waited until he could distinguish easily the position of the man in the pilot-house on board the Petrel before he opened fire. When he did so the two boats were yet some distance apart, and the chances of the Vivian's overtaking her rival were very slim. They were both moving at about the same rate of speed.

The detective glanced along the barrel of the rifle until the sight rested on a point at the side of the man in the pilot-house of the boat they were pursuing.

He pulled the trigger.

Crack!

The sharp report rung and echoed through the valley of the tall Palisades and then died away over the hills.

Crack! Crack!

Another bullet and another crashed into the pilot-house of the Petrel, splintering the compass-box and breaking the panes of glass.

Crack! Crack!

Two more with scarcely a second's intermission tore their way into the wood-work, one of them chipping off a splinter of a handle in the wheel.

Captain Luke became demoralized!

The first shot frightened him, but the others produced a much more alarming aspect. He thought that he was the object of the hidden gunner's aim, and when the fifth shot missed his arm by less than two inches, he cleared the pilot-house with a single leap and disappeared down the companionway. The yell to which he gave utterance floated across the waters to the listening ears on board the Vivian.

For a few moments the Petrel kept her headway, and then her bow began to shift around.

"We've got her," Captain Rennells shouted; "git them clubs ready while I range alongside."

The two steamers began to approach each other, the commander of the Vivian steering his vessel to a point broadside to the helpless Petrel. Several persons suddenly appeared upon the forward deck of the latter craft, a half dozen reports rung out, and some one sprang into the pilot-house.

A bullet whistled close to the detective's ear. Smiling grimly he raised his rifle to his shoulder, glanced along the shining barrel and then pulled the trigger.

CHAPTER XIII.

A FIGHT FOR LIFE.

CRACK!

The sixth shot sent out from Mat's rifle was not aimed at the woodwork in the pilot-house of the Petrel. It had covered the form of the man who had sprang to the wheel to save the steamer from floating around.

His hands had scarcely touched the wheel before the detective fired, and the pilot pitched headlong to the deck. The boat continued to veer around, and after sending another volley toward the pursuing craft the men on the Petrel's deck disappeared below.

No one on board the Vivian had been struck by the flying bullets, but several indentations in the side of the cabin and one broken window-pane in the engine room showed that they had not missed their mark entirely.

"Get ready," ordered Mat, as Dick and Josh seized their clubs, "and follow me when I jump on board the Petrel. Captain!"

"Ay, ay!"

"I guess we can manage these fellows without your leaving the pilot house."

Captain Rennells shook his head.

"I'll ring for Jack to stop her at the right moment," he said, "and then both of us will come out. One of those blanked bullets missed my head by about half an inch just now, and I want to get a crack at the man that fired it."

The engineer expressed himself as equally desirous of getting his hands on the individual who had shot into his apartment, and so the matter dropped.

The two little steamers drew nearer together. The Petrel was swinging about, now plunging to the right, and then, as a wave struck her, darting off to the left. No one was visible about her decks, and a thick, black cloud of smoke poured out of her smoke-stack.

Captain Rennells held the Vivian with a steady hand, and as she approached the helpless craft he began to move his vessel into her erratic course. It took perhaps ten minutes for him to get alongside, and as the two boats floated slowly together, no movement was made on either.

Suddenly they bumped together, and three forms leaped from the Vivian to the deck of the Petrel.

They were met by twice that number rushing from the other side of the cabin. The two parties met, clubs rose and fell, and a moment later the forward deck was the scene of a battle the equal of which had not taken place on shipboard in that vicinity for many years.

The engine on the Vivian had been stopped, and Jack followed the captain to the other vessel, making fast a rope running from her bow to the Petrel's stern. Then they rushed aft, and became needed assistants to the trio of fighters on the detective's side.

Opposed to them were the engineer, deck-hand and cook of the Petrel and the three runaway cadets. They also were armed with long, stout clubs. Captain Luke lay in a bunk in the cabin with a bullet in his shoulder.

"Wa-hoop!" snouted Josh, who, having encircled both arms around the struggling bodies of Lieutenant Benton and Harry Zelda, was doing his utmost to throw them to the deck. "Ef yo' hit me ag'in, yo' no-count nigger, I'll lam de haid off'n yo' soon's I git thro' hyer!"

This was addressed to the colored cook of the Petrel who had seen the peril of the two cadets and had hoped to assist them by dealing Josh a whack on the head at a moment when his club was not otherwise engaged. The blow would have broken most craniums, but it did not even dent Josh's, and before it could be repeated he had succeeded in bringing down his two opponents. The others, having closed in where the use of the clubs was almost impossible, used their fists to good effect.

The first blow Mat struck sent the burly deck-hand flying clear over the port rail, and the second caught Buck Larmount square in the mouth. It caused the sergeant to fetch up against the side of the cabin with force enough to shake out his teeth, and by the time he had recovered his senses Dick had embraced him and was almost turning him inside out in a one-sided collar-and-elbow wrestling match.

The cook and the engineer of the Petrel made a game fight, but when Captain Rennells and Jack took a hand, they were quickly brought to terms, and the detective assisted Josh in binding the two cadets whose forms he was straddling on the deck. Jack then shut off steam and from the engine-room produced a quantity of stout rope.

With this the five prisoners were bound securely, and when the deck-hand had been fished out of the water a similar fate met him. The battle had lasted only a few minutes, but in those few minutes had been struck enough blows to disfigure to some extent every one of the participants.

Josh's black eye was invisible, but nevertheless painful, while Dick, Buck Larmount and the three members of the Petrel's crew bore facial

evidence of the encounter. Lieutenant Benton swore with a number of venomous oaths that Josh had crushed no less than six of his ribs, and Harry Zelda supported the statement with another flow of profanity.

Mat drew aside Captain Rennells as soon as the wrists and ankles of the prisoners had been confined and said:

"Can't we leave the Vivian as she is now and tow her back to West Point?"

"Yes, I guess so. Jack can run this engine as well as he can his own, and I will act as pilot. The rest of you can guard the fellows on deck."

"That's just what I want to do. How long do you think it will take to get back?"

"I don't know exactly."

"Before noon?"

"I think so."

"Then start her at once. Put on all steam and land at the lower dock—not the one from which we started."

"Ay, ay," replied the captain as he mounted the steps to the pilot house. "Git down into the engine-room, Jack, and put on all steam."

Jack did so, and presently the voyage up the Hudson was begun.

Mat carried the prisoners down into the cabin, and made the wounded Luke as comfortable as possible. Then he singled out Lieutenant Benton, whose face indicated that he had given up all hope, and asked him:

"I suppose you know why you have been arrested?"

"For trying to escape from the Academy, I suppose."

"And for robbing the safe of the gold as well."

"What gold?"

"The twenty thousand dollars that you and Sam tried to bury at Garrison's the night before last."

The lieutenant groaned.

"The game is up," Mat said. "Nothing can save you now, and you cannot harm yourself by answering a few questions."

"Are we to be prosecuted?"

"I don't know. That lies with General Earl. We have plenty of evidence with which to convict you."

"What questions do you want to ask me?"

"I'd like to know if there are others besides you three and Sam that were implicated in the robbery."

"There were not."

"How did you get in the room where the money was?"

"We used a skeleton key."

"For the outer door?"

"Yes."

"But for the safe?"

Benton looked about him uneasily.

"Is it necessary that I convict myself like this?" he asked.

"No," said Mat, "but confession is best for you now."

The lieutenant seemed to think so, too, for he said abruptly:

"I found a slip of paper in our room one night on which Mason had marked the figures of the safe's combination. That was what first suggested stealing the gold."

"You used that, then, for opening the safe door?"

"Yes."

"And then hid the gold until the next night?"

"Yes."

"When, after capturing, as you thought, the Secret Service detective, you carried the money over to the east shore to bury it?"

"Yes."

"You had traded caps with the colored man, and he hired the boat that carried you across?"

Benton uttered another groan.

"You know all about it," he growled. "Why do you ask me anything?"

"To see if I was correct in my theory."

"Blank your theory, anyway! Who are you?"

The detective threw aside the lapel of his coat and displayed the badge of the Secret Service corps.

"I'm the detective whom you failed to capture," he said.

CHAPTER XIV.

CONCLUSION.

MASON and Miss Winthrop went directly to the Academy building after leaving the detective near the colored man's cabin. Although at such an hour the commanding officer was not in the habit of receiving visitors, he at once ordered the two to be admitted.

In General Earl's office a long consultation was held, and, at its conclusion, the girl caught the last train for New York City. Mason and the general then repaired to the officers' headquarters, and, with two members from the first company, went down to the Government boat-house.

Here they entered a skiff and rowed across the river. The paymaster acted as pilot and guided them straight to the spot where he had concealed the bag of gold.

It remained where he had placed it, and together they carried the weighty bag down to the skiff. They laid it under the stern-seat, and then rowed back again, carrying the treasure up to the general's room in the Academy when they reached the West Point shore. Here it was opened, and General Earl, turning to the paymaster, said:

"Here, Mason, count the stuff. You're a better hand at it than I am."

The young officer proceeded to do as he was requested, forming the twenty-dollar gold pieces into piles of twenty-five each. There were just forty of these piles—not a single piece was missing.

"The money is all here," he said, throwing aside the rough bag. "If you think it would be secure in this room, perhaps we'd better not place it in the safe until morning."

General Earl understood him, and replied that the two officers then present would be detailed to guard the treasure until the safe could be depended upon.

"And now," the general went on, "we will get two more officers, and place the men whose names you have given me under arrest. Come with me."

Mason followed him out of the room, and presently four uniformed men visited the rooms of Lieutenant Benton, Sergeant Larmount and Private Harry Zelda.

All were empty!

"The birds have flown," exclaimed the general, angrily. "Sound the call and have the entire school fall in! We'll see if any one else is absent."

A moment later the sharp call of the bugle rung out from the drill-hall. It caused the greatest confusion throughout the building, but scarcely five minutes had passed before the five companies were drawn up and ready for roll-call. This having been concluded, it was found that only three men were missing—Benton, Larmount and Zelda.

"Detail fifty men to go in search of these fellows," ordered the general of Lieutenant-Colonel Wentworth, "and don't come back without them."

The second officer promised to do as commanded, and at once set to work to appoint the fifty searchers.

General Earl did not return to bed at all, but paced from his office to the paymaster's room and back again until day broke. All but the fifty cadets who were to start in pursuit of the runaways went back to their rooms at the conclusion of the roll-call, and staid there until the regular hour for rising.

Day dawned, and the morning hours slipped rapidly away without further developments. It was nearly noon when two tugs, one towing the other, drew near to the dock, and word was flashed abroad that Mat Murray had returned with his prisoners.

It was even so!

The young detective had on board the Petrel all the persons who had left the upper landing in her—and all were captives. The steamers were both made fast to the Government pier and the prisoners removed to the guard-house. Captain Luke was placed in the hospital to have his wounded shoulder cared for, and the bruises of the others were attended to.

Having seen that his prisoners were safe in the guard-house, Mat repaired to the commanding officer's room and met the general still pacing restlessly along the hall.

"Hello, Murray," he said, pausing abruptly. "Have you heard of the new turn to affairs?"

"I don't know as I have," Mat replied.

"What has happened?"

"The prisoners have escaped."

"Which ones?"

"Benton, Larmount and Zelda."

"When?"

"Last night."

"But they're here now."

"Where?"

"In the guard-house."

General Earl was nonplused.

"Who put them there?" he asked.

"I did."

"You did—when?"

"A few minutes ago."
 "Where did you get them?"
 "They were escaping in a tug down the river. I hired another tug and overtook them, arresting both the cadets and those on board with them."

"And they are all in the guard-house now?"
 "Yes."
 "Then come with me. Young man, you're a good one, and I'll see that you are suitably rewarded for your work. Mason is in his office now. He came and told me how you had succeeded in effecting the capture of the colored man, and I have already sent out to have him brought to the Academy. Were the fellows whom you saw in the woods the cadets?"

"Yes."
 "And you followed and captured them alone?"

"No. I had the assistance of the men on board the steamer that I hired to go in pursuit of the cadets. I wish you'd divide the reward with them."

"I'll attend to that. Here we are at the guard-house, and we'll see these rascally students in chains—where they belong."

The general regarded the six prisoners lying in a row on the hard floor—for they had not yet had their bonds removed—and then turned to the detective at his side.

"You've cleared up the mystery, Murray," he said, as he extended his hand, "and perhaps saved a worthy and innocent man from going to prison. Now go and get some sleep, and come to my office in the morning."

Both the detective and those who had assisted him in the capture of the Petrel received a good share of the recovered treasure, while those who engaged in its theft are now serving terms in Sing Sing. Murray was advanced in position and salary in the Secret Service, and is now engaged in the counterfeit branch of the Treasury Department.

The crew of the Petrel were discharged with a fine, and are now conducting their old business in a better way. They will never again assist in the escape of cadets from the Government service. The crew of the Vivian are prospering greatly, and have been given several paying contracts for work at the Academy.

Murray did not come to West Point until a year or more later, when the class to which Mason belonged graduated. He congratulated the young officer on his brilliant prospects, and was invited to be one of the best men at the ex-paymaster's wedding.

"You are acquainted with the bride," Mason—now a second lieutenant in the regular army—said, lightly, as he bid Mat good-by, "and she joins me in asking you to assist us in the ceremony."

"I shall be glad to," Mat replied; "if it is possible for me to steer clear of an important case, when the time comes I'll be there."

And he was!

THE END.

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